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Virtual Reality's Rocky Start

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Nothing will come easy for the introduction of virtual reality. The hardware demands are steep, the units are expensive, the technology is still evolving, and plenty of naysayers are calling it the next 3DTV or the cynical byproduct of a tech industry looking for another item to market down the throats of gamers everywhere.

It doesn't help when both Oculus and HTC Vive launch with supply problems that quite frankly are embarrassing. People not being able to get the hardware they pre-ordered months in advance, much less make an impulse purchase on launch day, is not a good first step for an industry that research companies like SuperData say will reach 40 billion in revenue by 2020.

In fact, if you ordered an Oculus at the time that I wrote this, the delivery window would be August. Staff members who pre-ordered early are still waiting in anticipation with minimal communication about the delays. That is not how you launch hardware.

Despite all this, I am still impressed with the Vive and the Rift. I feel VR is still very compelling, warts and all, in these formative years. The PC space is where entertainment for virtual reality will be pushed and perfected, but that said, I agree with most analysts when they say that PlayStation VR will lead the charge of getting VR into consumers' hands.

The fact that users already have the PS4 hardware means the cost of entry is much lower at $499 ($399 if you don't need the camera and Move controllers). Combine this with Sony's experience with hardware launches (I seriously doubt it will experience the shortages we're seeing with Rift and Vive) and I believe the PSVR will be the spark that lights the VR fire when it launches this October.

Sony already announced an aggressive demo campaign, which I believe is the key to selling people on the power of VR in games. Yes, the technology is just at the beginning of its ascent as an entertainment medium, but I know after spending time with VR that I am already in love with the experiences and want it to be a centerpiece to my gaming life. It's something that you simply have to try. I have yet to show it to someone and not have them walk away with a smile and a story to tell about what they saw.

So even if the price of entry for VR is too much for you to handle, or you don't want to be an early adopter in this new entertainment space, do yourself a favor and get out there and find a way to try it. I think you will be shocked by what you see.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

44 Dishonored 2

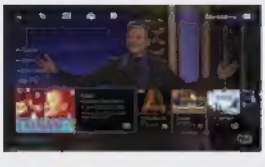
Dishonored 2 is heading to a new city, adding a new playable character, and myriad new powers. We got the first look at where the follow-up to Corvo Attano's violent revenge story is heading next and how it fares when taking advantage of all the current generation hardware has to offer. ***by Matt Bertz***

12 Virtual Reality Enters The Real World
We've spent time with the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive, played plenty of games, and have our full report (and reviews) on this brave new video gaming frontier.

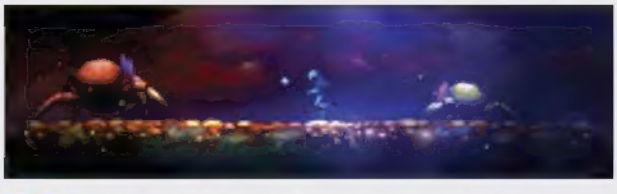
28 Surviving The Trip Downriver
We spoke to indie developer The Molasses Flood to find out what's next.

30 Top Ten Stealth Masters
We ranked the best of those who never make their presence known.

40 Interview: Girls Make Games
Girls Make Games founder Laila Shabir tells us all about her mission to educate young girls on the art of making games, in hopes of providing the industry with a better balance of creators.

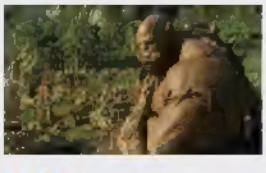


32 Cutting The Cord: PlayStation Vue
Will Sony's new TV distribution subscription service kill cable?



34 Impulse: Nintendo Still Denies Us Metroid, But Other Options Surge In Promise
Two distinct Metroid-inspired indie experiences grace Impulse this month.

36 Teaching Your Kids To Code, One Hour At A Time
The educating world of coding and programming is more open than it's ever been. If you've ever wanted to learn how to boss a computer around, we've got some great resources.



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The future of video game movies looks brighter than ever.

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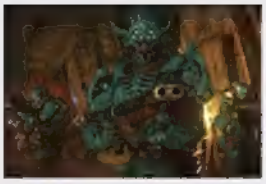
96 **Game Over**

Correction: *In issue #277, we incorrectly stated that a new entry in the Fire Emblem series had been confirmed. Intelligent Systems and Nintendo have not announced development on a new title. We apologize for the error.*



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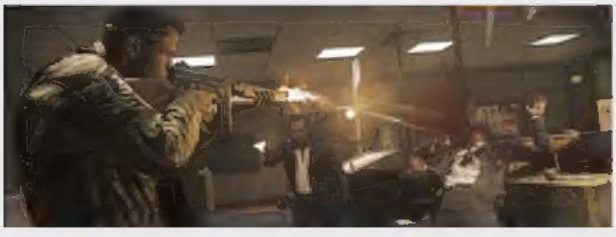
Even when he's made of bricks, BB-8 is just as adorable.



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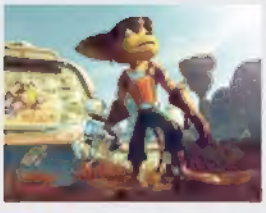
65 Zero Time Dilemma
Learn about the new updates on the next murder-room simulator.



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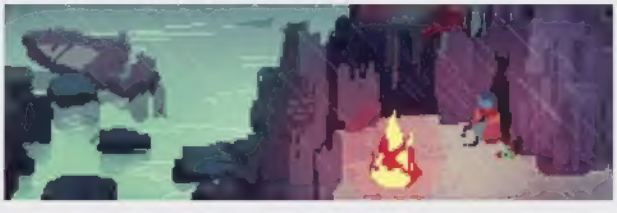
What's old is new again.



81 Hyper Light Drifter
This entrancing Kickstarter success story is our Game of the Month.

90 Bravely Second
Is Square Enix's classic RPG callback sequel as fun as the first?

91 Star Fox Zero
Is Fox and his team the savior the Wii U needs?

94 Classic: Ratchet & Clank
Ratchet & Clank's early designs were much different than what they are today.

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feedback

Gears of War, the state of the RTS, and recommended games for newbies were all hot topics this month, while other readers debated the latest rant from the notorious Darth Clark.

What's In A Name?

I loved reading the Gears of War 4 cover story. Ben Reeves really goes into the behind-the-scenes details of what it takes to create the new game, which is something players would never know just by playing it. The only minor complaint I have is The Coalition going with Gears of War 4 for the title; they have a whole new team, studio, characters, and storyline, but you'd never guess that with the name. I would think they'd want to go with something like Gears of War: New Beginnings. I know that name is stupid, but you get my point. Give the new game a title it deserves, not just the same name with a number added to it.

Emily Reece
via email

Forgoing a unique subtitle in favor of a numbered sequel is a double-edged sword. On one hand, a numbered entry can seem boring and uncreative. However, it can also set the expectation of being an integral chapter in a beloved series, potentially selling more copies than an offshoot. Seeing as how Gears of War Judgment was met with lackluster reviews and sales, it's not surprising The Coalition wants their game to be associated with the core series, despite all that's new. For more on Gears of War 4, head to gameinformer.com/gears4.

Laugh It Up

I just finished reading this year's Game Infarcer, and oh my goodness was it amazing. Bloodborne 2 and its Seussian horrors would be hysterical and frustrating for sure! The Make Your Own Review was also brilliant! I had good belly laughs from start to finish – my only complaint is that there weren't more pages.

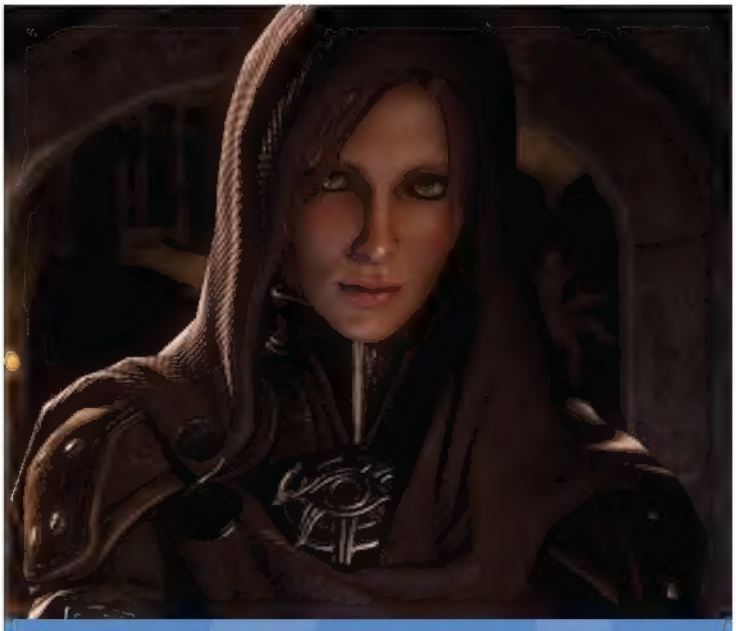
Nicholas Huntsman
via email

As always, I enjoyed reading this year's Game Infarcer, and I look forward to reading all of the Feedback letters from confused readers in the next issue. I especially loved the Make Your Own Review – I gave The Witcher Ep. 4: License to Spill a 9.5 just to tick off all of the fanboys that think it deserves a 10.

Ryan Holm
via email

Laughing at misguided Game Infarcer responses is a time-honored tradition, but it seems nowadays gullible readers prefer to share their confusion and anger via Twitter rather than email. Thankfully, Darth Clark still garnered his share of detractors this year, as well as a few supporters – and we don't know which is scarier.

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com



Dragon Age Inquiry

So here's my issue: I paid $70 for the deluxe edition of Dragon Age: Inquisition. Then came the Jaws of Hakkon DLC for $15. Then the weapon packs for $5 each. Then another $15 DLC expansion, and finally the Trespasser expansion that serves as an epilogue for the game. I'm looking at over $100 for me, a day-one purchaser and loyal fan, to own the entire game. Fast forward to a few months ago, and the Game of the Year edition – which contains everything – is on sale for $30. If I had just waited a year, I could've saved over $80 on the complete game. Do you see this becoming an issue? I know my experience with Inquisition will change the way I purchase new games from now on.

Mike Wilson
Wisconsin

Ahh, the day-one dilemma. While it's certainly easy to feel ripped off by the inevitable GOTY edition of your favorite game, you're forgetting one important thing: You got to play it a year before those waiting for the complete package. Whether that's worth the extra money is up to you, but you can't blame publishers for trying to entice on-the-fence customers once initial sales slow down.

Darth Clark Strikes Again

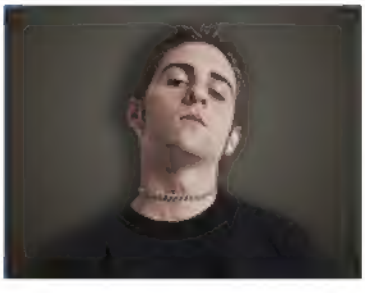
Darth Clark's article (Credit Where It Isn't Due, issue 276) absolutely sickens me and shows just how blatantly you disrespect the developers who work hard to create the games you say you love. Yes, games are entertainment, but even though big companies fund them, individuals are the ones doing the footwork, and they deserve recognition. If all companies treated their top designers like Konami treated Kojima, the industry would fall apart in a hurry and your favorite games wouldn't exist. Maybe you should think about that before you disrespect the artists whose blood, sweat, tears, and time away from their families goes into the games you enjoy.

Joe H.
via email

Is it just me, or does Darth Clark's argument about Konami kind of make sense? Think of it in terms of sports: You have a star player, but he and the team admins start disagreeing on things. You wouldn't want to keep him, because tension will escalate and eventually the focus won't be on winning, but watching the two parties fight instead. I know it's a parody, but is there a secret part of you guys that understands Konami's decision and maybe agrees with Darth Clark?

Joseph Alston
via email

Not even a little bit, Joseph, but we suppose that's why Darth Clark gets paid the big bucks.



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"How will the virtual reality industry get itself going in the market?"

It's already going.

"If you could bring a game to life, what game would you choose?"

Cookie Clicker.

"Has a developer ever used an idea out of Game Infarcer to make a real game?"

Nope. Well, not intentionally.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Hey! We're making a multiplayer party game with forklifts."

Best Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

"I just finished reading the Top Ten Helicopter Fights, and it's reopened an old wound."

Question Of The Month:

What's the next must-buy game on your list and why?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month the honorable folks at Arkane Studios gave us a behind-the-scenes look at the Dishonored 2. From left to right: Marco Mele, Sebastien Mitton, Dinga Bakaba, and Harvey Smith. **(Right)** You couldn't ask for better interns than Luke Walaszek, Connor Trinske, and Joe Buchholz. So we didn't. Thanks for all the hard work, guys!

On Your Mind

- Go-to Game Recommendations
- Game Infarcer Love
- Gears Of War Adoration
- Darth Clark Is A Jerk/Genius
- David Hodgson, The Strategy Guide Guru
- Too Many Expletives In Games
- Boy Scouts Looking For Merit Badges

Highly Recommended

In issue 276, we asked readers what their go-to game recommendation is for new players. Nintendo's stable of classic characters fared well in the responses, while others opted for mainstream – or sadistic – choices.

My recommendation for new players is Mario and Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story. The learning curve is forgiving, and each area offers a new and fun mechanic to play around with. Each enemy type feels unique and can be avoided if one doesn't feel like fighting them. The game is surprisingly funny; I got sucked into it and have played it many a time since then.

Will Garrett

I like to recommend Call of Duty, Battlefield, or similar shooters to new players. The controls are pretty easy to master, and the gameplay is engaging. And the control and reaction skills learned in these shooters can be used in most games.

Sam Johnson

When recommending a game to new players, I often suggest Dark Souls or Bloodborne because I am a nice guy and do not want to be mean. I feel that these are perfectly accessible, easy, relaxing games for newcomers! Or I just like dodging controllers and hearing screams and expletives. One or the other.

Sam Caloras

Fight The Future

I just read the Feedback letter from Cody Valentine where he said he was disappointed in the direction Far Cry Primal is going (Primal Instinct, issue 276). I totally disagree with him; I think more companies need the guts to make games that aren't just all future and fantasy. I want something different, like a good medieval game without all the nerdy wizards and spells. A Call of Duty: Civil War would be cool too. The video game industry could use a good history lesson.

Joshua
via email

We don't know what's so "nerdy" about raining down fire and lightning on your enemies with a mere wave of a staff, but your disparaging wizard comment aside, we're inclined to agree. Far Cry Primal highlighted a land and time rarely seen in games, and while it was far from historically accurate, it was a fun diversion for the series. If the recent rumors about Battlefield 5 being set during World War I are true, history buffs will have more to look forward to this holiday.

Dead to RTS?

In Daniel Tack's review of Homeworld: Deserts of Kharak, he mentions that the real-time strategy genre is waning. Do you believe that MOBAs are responsible for this declining interest, or is it just a natural cycle for a genre over 30 years old? What do you think would save the genre, and why aren't companies making as many RTS games anymore?

Michael Rogerson
via email

The real-time strategy genre is almost as old as the gaming industry itself, and has evolved a lot over the years. The tower defense, 4X, real-time tactics, and MOBA genres were all born from the humble RTS, and may indeed be contributing to its dwindling status. We wouldn't worry though; if Kickstarter has taught us anything, it's that there will always be an audience for the classics, and developers willing to cater to that audience.

(Left) Kyle recently got a tour of Pixar's office courtesy of layout artist Leo Santos. Kyle naturally gravitated to the only other redhead he could find. (Right) This year at DICE, Reiner caught up with Yahoo's Ben Silverman, Psyonix's Ben Beckwith, and Telltale Games' Job Stauffer.

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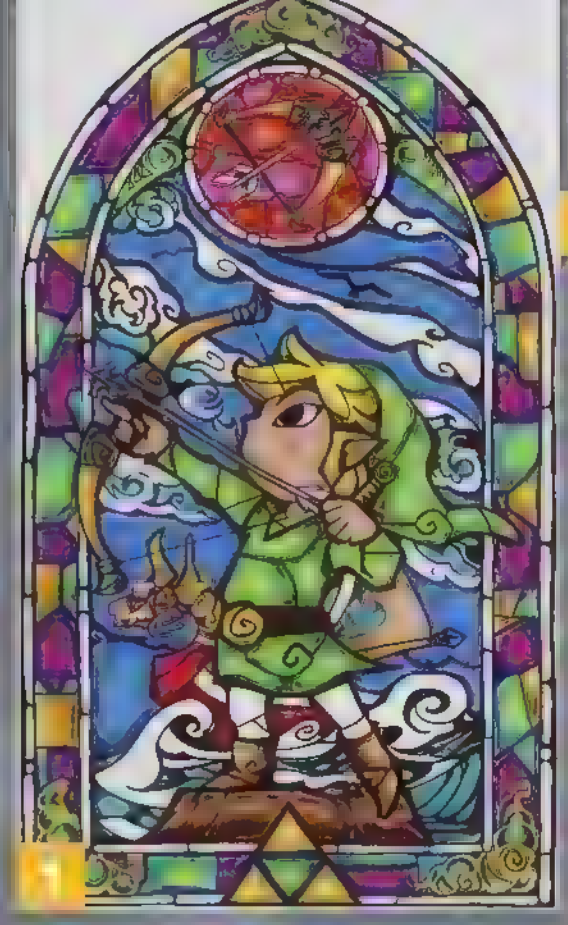


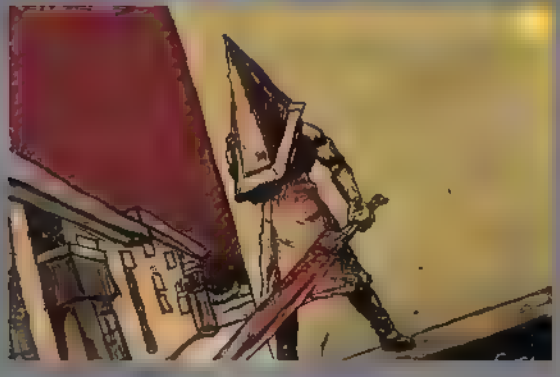
WINNER

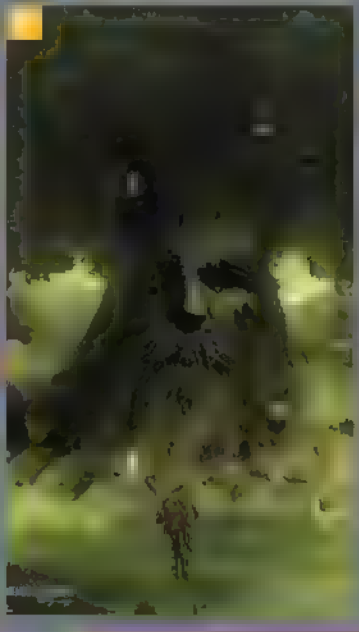
1 Nicole Weaver
Most buildings need video game–inspired stained-glass windows

2 Saga Enote
If not for the sword, Pyramid Head would look like an ordinary person with a traffic cone stuck on his head

3 Brady Goldsmith
The real question this art brings: Who keeps the knee's facial hair trimmed?

4 Alexis Rios
Sure, we can get behind the idea of cheeseburgers and Studio Ghibli characters living inside of Pokémon





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(Left) Iron Galaxy Studios' Dave Lang recently showed Brian Shea what's in store for Killer Instinct's third season. (Hint: It involves Shea losing badly.) **(Right)** Shea also played some baseball with SCE San Diego's Ramone Russell. Well, video game baseball, anyway. .

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connect

28 what's next for the molasses flood?

30 top 10 stealth masters

32 the verdict on playstation vue

34 video game movies on the horizon

36 teaching kids to code

42 opinion: the teenage years of mobile gaming

VIRTUAL REALITY ENTERS THE REAL WORLD

We evaluate the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive platforms at launch

No matter when you were born, you can probably recall hearing about the dream of virtual reality. Whether it was the misfires of projects like Nintendo's Virtual Boy, or movies like *Tron*, *The Lawnmower Man*, or *The Matrix*, the promise of an engaging virtual world has been tantalizingly out of reach for decades. This spring, the two biggest competitors in the new VR marketplace finally launched retail units that deliver on some of that promise.

The cost of entry is steep for both the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive, especially when factoring in the connected PC hardware, and the technology isn't yet perfect. But after two of our editors spent combined hundreds of hours exploring these two new devices, we're confident in one thing: The dream of viable virtual reality is finally a reality. This technology has the potential to expand into multiple facets of entertainment, education, and art in the coming years. Research firm SuperData forecasts VR sales to reach $40 billion dollars in revenue by 2020, if ever this burgeoning technology trend had a shot at entering the mainstream, this is the moment.

Since their recent launches, the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive platforms have struggled to fulfill pre-orders, so you may not be able to get your hands on them for several months. By the time you can, the looming launch of Sony's more affordable and less technologically advanced PlayStation VR in October will further step up the competition between platforms.

Our editors spent several days exploring each of these two new platforms and their launch line-ups. Our grades reflect the quality of the hardware and overall experience as of launch. Read on for our full reports on each, impressions of the most interesting VR games and apps for both platforms, and two reviews of Rift-ready PCs.

Oculus Rift Review
p14

HTC Vive Review
p20

Rift-Ready PC Roundup
p26

OCULUS RIFT REVIEW

A Dream Becomes An Impressive (Virtual) Reality

by Andy McNamara

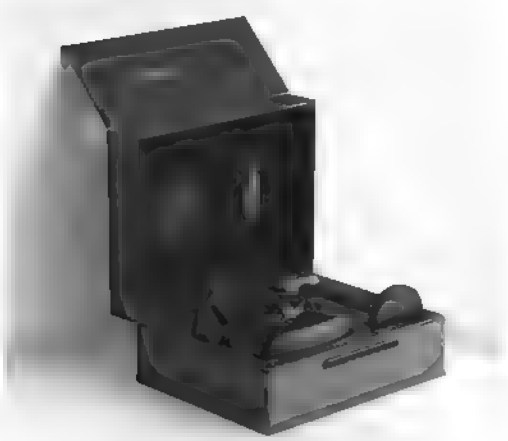
I first saw Oculus Rift in June 2012, when John Carmack showed me a primitive version of Palmer Luckey's hardware running Doom 3 – and I do mean primitive. Carmack warned of all the problems with head-tracking, latency, and low resolution, but he also noted with a bit of glee that it was the best demonstration of what was possible in virtual reality to date, and he noted that many of the problems would be solved quickly considering the speed at which VR innovation was happening.

I wasn't sold at that exact moment, but I remember saying to myself that while it was flawed, there was something there. It provided a glimmer of what we would come to call "presence" – that feeling of physically being in a virtual place and time.

All those problems Carmack listed were solved rather quickly. In August 2012, Luckey launched the Oculus Rift Kickstarter campaign. It quickly raised $2.4 million and ignited the imagination of gamers and game developers everywhere. The next big step for Oculus was Facebook's purchase of the company on March 25, 2014, for $2 billion in cash and stock, which immediately put VR in the world spotlight.

A lot has changed from that original Rift prototype. The rush of investment dollars has fueled innovation and pushed the hardware forward at a breakneck pace, and the excitement from the development community is unlike anything I have ever seen.

The Oculus Rift is the first consumer unit in this new age of VR, and we finally get to examine the product in the wild. I have been playing games in VR in bits and pieces for the last few years, but for this review I played with the final Rift daily for several weeks and I'm thrilled to share my verdict.



The Hardware

It isn't cheap. For $599 you get the Oculus headset with appropriate support pieces, including an Xbox One controller, the Oculus remote, and the sensor that reads the location of the head-mounted display (the unit that you strap on your face). And that's not factoring in the cost of a high-end computer necessary for running the headset. The unit is tethered to the PC, so it is limited to standing and sitting experiences, and the sensor must have a clear line to the head-mounted display.

These are the basics needed to make VR work without making you unsettled. The camera tracks the headset (working in concert with the gyroscope and accelerometer built into the unit), so when you move your head in VR, the world reacts accordingly. Your brain is not easily fooled, it expects the world to behave within certain rules, and when "what you see" doesn't match up to "what you expect" your body lets you know it.

Setting up the Oculus is surprisingly easy. Its software walks you through installation, and anyone who has plugged a keyboard into a computer before and knows the difference between USB and HDMI should be able to complete the process. After you set up the hardware and create an account, all you need to do is download some software and install it. This process is painless.

The unit has two AMOLED displays that deliver resolution at 1200x1080 per eye and refreshes at 90Hz. The refresh rate of 90 frames-per-second is basically the low-end threshold for VR games, as they must run at 90 frames-per-second or the user experience suffers. Early versions of the Rift suffered from a "screen-door effect" that made it look like you were viewing the world through a bug screen, but the final hardware seems to have solved this issue. That's not to say that the worlds are crystal clear; you occasionally see a flicker, or the world might appear like you are looking through a lens – because you are.

That said, the performance of the head-mounted display is impressive. The Oculus delivers a believable virtual-reality world. I wouldn't go as far as to say my mind was completely fooled into thinking I was there, but playing games this way takes immersion to another level. The current screen resolution is more than enough to deliver a fantastic experience, the refresh rate is acceptable, and the head-tracking feels precise.

Rift System Requirements

- Graphics Card: Nvidia GTX 970/AMD R9 290 equivalent or greater
- Processor: Intel i5-4590 equivalent or greater
- Memory: 8GB+ RAM
- Output: HDMI-compatible 1.3 video output
- Inputs: 3x USB 3.0 ports, 1x USB 2.0
- Operating System: Windows 7 SP1 64-bit or newer

The Oculus hardware is surprisingly elegant considering that it makes users look a little silly with the thing strapped onto their heads. Function is clearly valued over form, but kudos to Oculus for creating headgear light enough to be comfortable. It's wrapped in fabric to give it a warm, inviting feeling more akin to a piece of clothing rather than a hunk of plastic technology.

The unit uses a series of adjustable Velcro straps to customize the fit, but the harness is spring-loaded so it can stretch as you place it on your head for an easy transition from reality to VR. That is, unless you have glasses – but I'll get to that later.

The trick to wearing the Rift is to let the tracking triangle at the back of the main strap take the bulk of the weight. Think of it like putting on a baseball cap – you want to nestle it to the back of your skull then let that work in concert with the straps to hold it up. While you still have to put a bit of pressure on your face, preventing it from crushing your skull makes the whole experience much more pleasant.

After you have the unit on your head, there is a built-in mic for chat and it's easy to align the integrated headphones (though you can remove them with an included tool if you have other headphones you prefer to use). The integration gives you one less thing to fumble with, and the headphones deliver a more-than-adequate audio experience. I picked up audio cues from all around me, and while the headphones don't completely cover the ears, they drown out outside noise surprisingly well. They also make it easy to free one ear by simply sliding one of the ear pieces back to interact with anyone that walks up (though talking to people while wearing a VR headset feels just as silly for you as it does to the people you are interacting with).

Overall, I can't complain about what Oculus is delivering for the price, since it includes a lot of impressive technology. However, people who wear glasses will have a harder time appreciating it. If you have small frames you may be all right, but I needed to wear my contacts to enjoy the Rift. The image was clearer since I didn't have the headset sitting in odd positions to accommodate my glasses. Wearing contacts also made it bearable to take the headset on and off. Otherwise, I had to take my glasses off, insert them into the unit, and then place the whole contraption onto my head. As I mentioned before, it didn't fit quite right even then, and the pressure it put on my frames resulted in headaches, creating an uncomfortable vice effect that made me worry about the damage it may be causing to my glasses.

The one knock I have on the Rift is Oculus didn't include a pass-through camera so the user can see the real world through the head-mounted display. This decision was probably made to keep costs down, but the inability to see the world around you can be frustrating. I'd place the unit on my head, then realize I hadn't put the controller in my lap, and because I wouldn't want to deal with seating the thing on my face again I would feel around like I was wearing a blindfold to find the controller or remote. I would cross my legs and put my knee into the underside of my desk on a fairly frequent basis. People snuck up on me numerous times as well, but I guess that is the price for presence.

You can't talk about the Oculus Rift without bringing up the PC that you need to run it. The minimum spec requirements aren't low.

Oculus offers an app that you can download to test your hardware to see what you need to upgrade to run the Oculus Rift, but this isn't average PC hardware (see sidebar); unless you purchased your hardware recently, most will need to upgrade or buy a new computer altogether. Oculus is working with Alienware, Asus, and Dell to offer Oculus-ready PCs to purchase that start at $949 with the purchase of a Rift, but that puts minimal entry-level costs for the Rift north of $1,600 if you get all the discounts. Without them, I put the entry price at about $2,000 if you don't already have a rig.

All told, the Rift comes at a cost. But is the experience worth it?

AirMech: Command from Carbon Games is a great example of how VR changes the way you see battle unfold

The Experience

When you first put the Rift on, you are greeted by Oculus Home, a giant modern room with three panels for managing friends, recent software, and a center screen that can be toggled between featured items, the store, and your entertainment library. It's intuitive, as you can use a controller to select things or you can navigate with a small dot (essentially a "mouse" pointer that you move with your head). Conversely, you could download and install games from the app on a standard PC monitor, then just fire the entertainment from inside the Rift. Finding entertainment is functional, but the storefront doesn't have all the bells and whistles, like parental controls, wishlists, or patch notes.

A number of movies are available to watch, as well as a few demos to play with that show some interesting things that can be done in VR, but the real attraction for the Rift at this point is the games.

The overall launch line-up offers an impressive degree of variety. One of the great things in VR is that simple things are once again amazing. I've looked at tons of computer monitors and read plenty of notes in games, but this mundane activity is a fresh experience in VR. You lean over books in Chronos, and can flip the pages. It's not exactly groundbreaking, but the way VR draws you in is what makes it special.

Take VR Tennis Online, for example. Playing tennis with the gamepad has been done before, but the ability to read the ball in virtual space makes it more interesting. When you are serving and you toss the ball over your head, you instinctively look up to get a read on the ball. Is this game better than other tennis games? Probably not, but the immersion of VR makes it a singular experience. Normally, I wouldn't play a modern tennis game for 10 minutes, but I'll play for hours in VR.

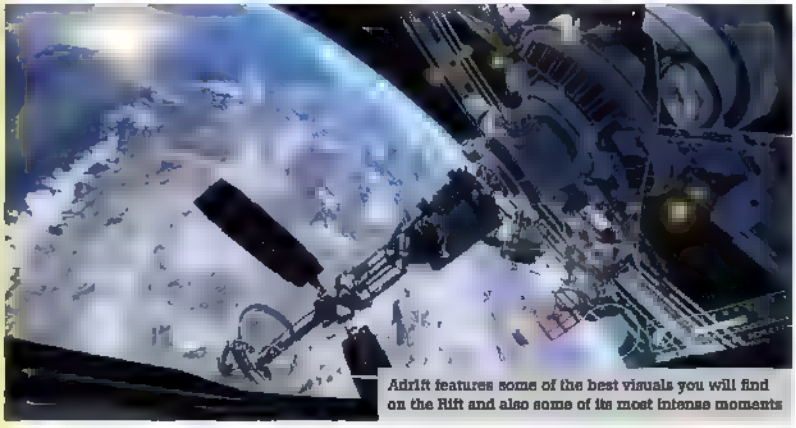
The range of game experiences is more impressive than just reading pages and tossing tennis balls. Scale goes hand-in-hand with how presence works. Think of the way you play games now as watching the fishbowl from the outside. In VR, you stick your face in the fishbowl, so everything takes on a completely different scale. It's the reason no screenshot can do VR justice; it simply doesn't give you the correct scale of how you see the space.

At times you see games like they are toys, with the world spread out before you like you're surveying a tabletop board game. In these examples, you usually control the action from third-person, but you feel like you are sitting in first-person at the table, effectively manipulating the world.

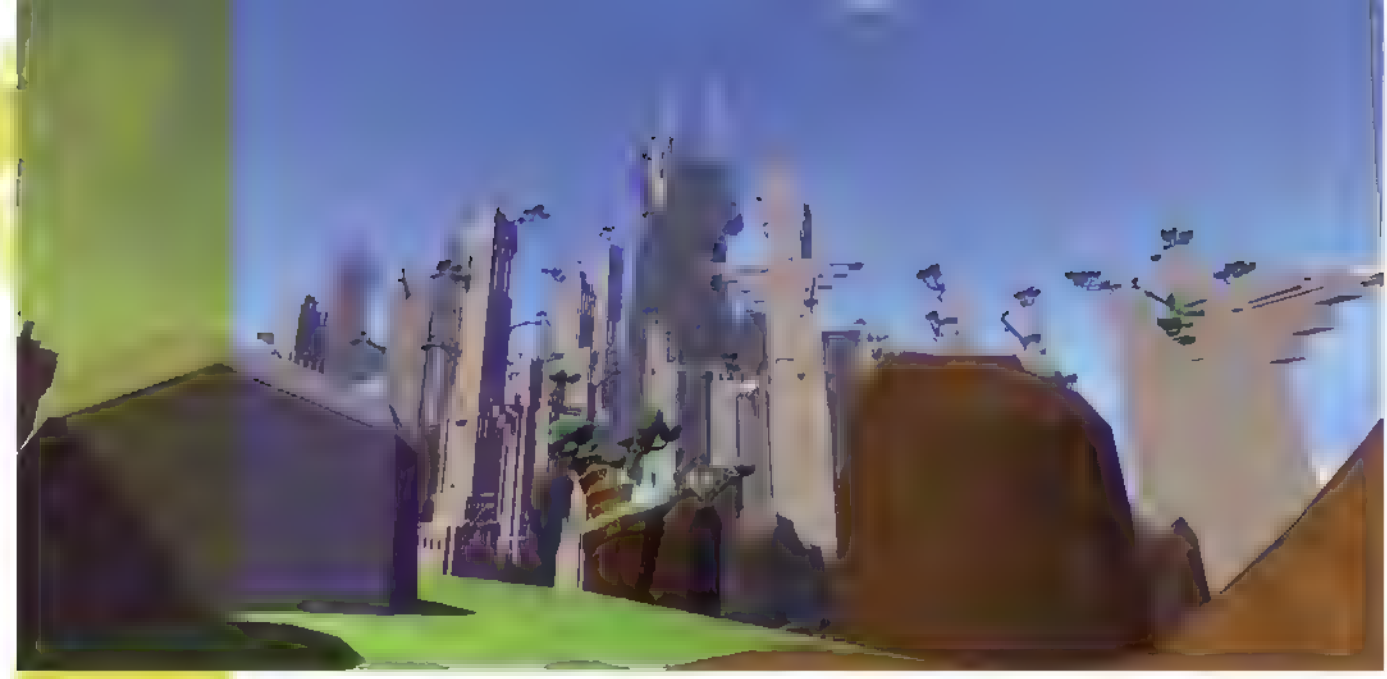
Great examples of this in the launch line-up are the real-time strategy game AirMech: Command, the platformer Lucky's Tale, and the racer BlazeRush, all of which are charming and fun, as well as surprisingly immersive. We instinctively think VR means experiences have to be in first-person to deliver presence, but these games show that different perspectives still deliver a powerful effect.

Other titles forgo the included Xbox One controller as your main input and use your gaze as the primary targeting device. A couple of my favorite examples of this are EVE Gunjack, a shooter that puts you in turrets fighting waves of enemies that attack in various formations (think VR Galaga), and Darknet, a puzzle game that challenges you to hack various defense nets in cyberspace. Using your gaze to target is easy, particularly in Gunjack. Normally in a turret game, you see the threat and then react – but in VR, you're already there.

Oculus Home features a crackling fire, fine art, and floating user interfaces. Welcome to cyberspace



Adrift features some of the best visuals you will find on the Rift and also some of its most intense moments



Andy McNamara's Top Ten Rift Experiences

1. Chronos
2. Adr1ft
3. Radial-G
4. Lucky's Tale
5. Darknet
6. BlazeRush
7. AirMech Command
8. Pinball FX2 VR
9. EVE Gunjack
10. Henry

All entertainment for the Oculus Rift comes with a comfort rating: Comfortable, Moderate, or Intense. When you turn, twist, or rotate in cyberspace, the intensity ratchets up, which is why Adr1ft and EVE Valkyrie are two of the most talked-about games for the Oculus (though I think Chronos is the best game in the launch lineup; read our review on p. 83). Both take place in space and are well-produced VR experiences, and both give you a real taste of how VR can produce a sense of presence.

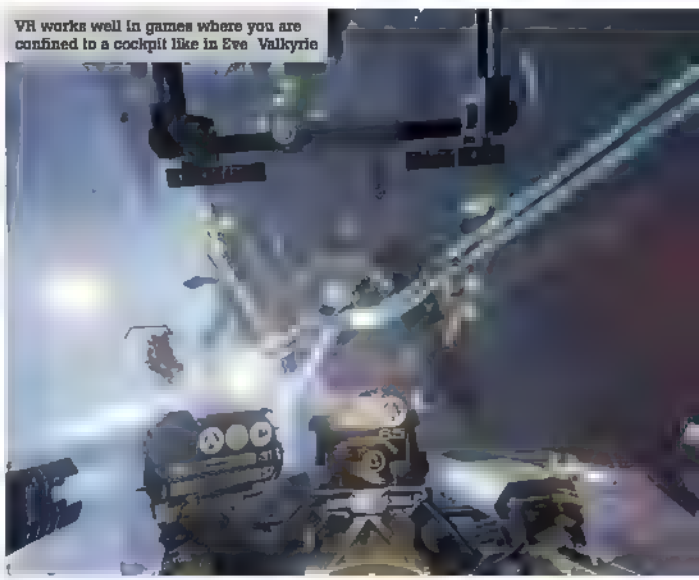
In Valkyrie, you pilot spaceships in a short campaign mode and in multiplayer matches, and while the experience is limited, the sensation of flight is the main attraction. You have a virtual body and cockpit, and since you can use a controller or a flight stick to pilot the craft, it leaves you free to look around, which gives you that feeling of "being there." That ability to control the camera and move at the same time is how you drive a car or ride a bike. Virtual reality brings that intuitive experience to piloting crafts, and Valkyrie delivers that experience (read our review on p. 86).

Adr1ft takes another approach to space, as it puts you in the role of an astronaut coming to just as your space station is torn to bits. Your job: Get home. You piece together the story and solve various puzzles as you work your way through the tatters of your off-planet home, but everything takes on another level of intensity in VR. Your helmet is rendered, so it gives this eerie and claustrophobic feeling of being helpless in the emptiness of space. Your heart pounds in your ears, and you even the slightest nudge sends you tumbling. It's easily the most intense experience on the Rift, and might even be too much for some. But when you come out of an airlock, with debris bouncing off your helmet, your heart pounding in your ears, and suddenly your stomach sinks as the vastness of space finds you floating thousands of miles above earth – that's a testament to the power of VR. It's both beautiful and terrifying all at once (read our review on GameInformer.com).

Adr1ft was one of the few games to give me the queasy feeling that is so often mentioned when talking about VR, but the game wants to make you uncomfortable. Think of VR as an amusement park; some people crave bigger and better roller coasters that push the boundaries of what we can take physically, and others skip those experiences and choose to ride the teacups.

The Oculus lineup does a good job of bringing lots of options so everyone can find something that fits the parameters of their VR sea legs. A couple of experiences got to me, but usually I found that bad software led to poor experiences. For example, Radial-G might be the most intense ride of the launch line-up, but it never hiccups and the world feels believable, so it never made me uncomfortable. Others might not find it as inviting, and this variance from one user to another is why making blanket recommendations is difficult. However, user experience will inform the software community, and that I think things will only get better in the future, both in the experiences built in VR and the way we communicate discomfort so people can find the rides that suit them.

All told, the Oculus software lineup offers a lot of variety, especially at launch. That said, there is no system-seller level piece of software yet. While I expect there to be a lot of software over the coming years, it is unlikely that VR's smaller install base in these early years will allow major software investment at the triple-A level anytime soon.



VR works well in games where you are confined to a cockpit like in Eve: Valkyrie

The Conclusion

Virtual reality is an amazing new dimension to gaming and entertainment as a whole, but it's hard not to talk about virtual reality, and specifically the Oculus Rift, right now without bringing up the price.

If cost is a major concern for you, you will likely be disappointed; even though the current offering is impressive, no gaming entertainment can live up to VR's current price tag in the PC space, be it Rift or Vive. But if you have the means, or you are an enthusiast who can overlook the price for the power of the experience, the purchase is worthwhile. Oculus is impressive on so many levels, and after spending endless hours with the unit, I'm drawn to VR like a moth to a flame, and I find the hardware execution of the Rift's head-mounted display to be second to none.

The games aren't as advanced as current console triple-A titles, but they are different experiences and bring a different type of fun and wonderment to gaming and entertainment. Watching movies, using a virtual desktop, looking at VR images – it all brings with it a certain sense of awe. Could this luster of novelty wear off? I can't answer that question with certainty. I believe that as the technology advances, and as developers learn to take advantage of it, we will see VR as the ultimate way to experience entertainment. I feel Oculus is at the cutting edge of this form of entertainment, but we aren't there quite yet.

Oculus shipped without the Touch motion controllers, which still don't have a price point, but controllers created for interacting in cyberspace are essential to the future of any VR platform. We will see a lot of innovation in that space and in the technology that fuels VR over the coming years. Oculus Rift is something you buy to be in on the ground floor and experience the amazing beginnings of this technology, as this time it isn't some undercooked 1990s VR experience; Oculus Rift is proof that VR is the real deal. Even though its Touch hardware is coming out at a later date, the Rift offers the best package for VR. The unit is sleek, the software offerings are varied, and the overall package feels more tailored like a console launch than a PC testing ground.

The Final Grade

Virtual reality still has a way to go before it will be in every household, but Oculus Rift is a strong first step. The Oculus launch lineup is solid, with more than a few bright spots. It's a shame Touch wasn't available out of the gate, as adding controllers that interact in virtual space is something that makes VR shine. However, I can't help but be impressed with the Oculus Rift, despite its steep cost and minor standard-of-living issues like comfort for players who wear glasses and the lack of a pass-through camera.

If you can afford the Rift, I don't think you will be disappointed. You will find experiences that are indeed singular and spectacular, but this really is only the beginning. If the price is too steep for you right now, not only will the technology improve in future versions, but the software will be more mature, and the cost will come down to a more consumer-friendly price point over time. But definitely get out there and try out the Rift if you do nothing else.

B

Even playing games from a third-person perspective are immersive on the Rift

HTC VIVE REVIEW

This Valve-powered tech is experimental, inconsistent, and sometimes magical

by Matt Miller

Two heads may indeed be better than one. A project that neither HTC nor Valve could bring to fruition alone has found life through an intense cooperative venture, and the result is the Vive. The virtual-reality headset marks a new direction both for the successful phone company and the leader in the PC gaming sphere, and sets the two companies in opposition to the significant financial muscle of the Facebook-funded Oculus.

An accelerated design and development cycle for the Vive has led to a fascinating-but-flawed final product, and one that distinguishes itself in important ways from the Rift. The focus on room-scale virtual experiences allows for novel and fascinating software, and many users will appreciate the availability of a full VR package right out of the gate, rather than the competition's plan to roll out sensors and motion controllers as a peripheral later. That opening advantage comes with a hefty price tag, but for anyone who can't wait to witness the full magic of moving and interacting in a virtual world, it's a compelling choice.

The developers working on software for the Vive have established the hardware's potential as a game-changing piece of technology, even if some of that potential has yet to be fulfilled. Many of the Vive's most impressive software is work-in-progress, with demos, betas, and first episodes of larger games dominating the initial slate of offerings. These games and apps exhibit little uniformity even in standardizing what buttons should do what, often leading to a confusing and haphazard sense of discovery.

Nonetheless, discovery and experimentation is core to the Vive's success. Even when the tech or games falter, there's an undeniable magic here. More than once, I felt like I was interacting with a new medium for entertainment, art, and education. In its finest moments, the Vive makes me feel like I'm personally interacting with objects and completing actions in a different world. If that's not proof that virtual reality has finally arrived, I don't know what is.

The Hardware

The HTC Vive comes in a standalone package that includes almost everything you need to play, move, and interact in its virtual worlds. I stress the "almost," because the very nature of the product demands a significant space to function. That means that you're either looking at setting up a dedicated VR room in your home, or you're willing to move a lot of furniture around before every play session. Either way, plan on a designated empty space of at least 6.5-by-5 feet, not including whatever desks or tables support your monitor or TV and gaming rig. For those with an abundance of space, the sensor technology can move out to more than 16 feet diagonally. Generally speaking, a larger space is going to provide better play experiences, but even testing in a space closer to those minimum values, I had a fun time. Users with children or pets should consider setting up an enclosed space with a door for safety, and anyone living in smaller spaces may be out of luck.

The Vive's big distinguishing feature is the freedom to move within the confines of your pre-designated space, and use the controllers to directly manipulate virtual objects you encounter there. This is accomplished via the connection between the headset, controllers, and two base station sensors that must be mounted high on opposite corners of the play space. The base stations are mostly unobtrusive, with a slick black face and cube shape that is reminiscent of surround speakers. The included mounts allow placement by users willing to do some drilling, but high-set bookshelves or tripods (sold separately) are another option. Each base station uses its own power supply, so expect to run some wires to nearby outlets in each case.

Vive System Requirements

- Graphics Card: Nvidia GeForce GTX 970/AMD Radeon R9 290 equivalent or better
- Processor: Intel Core i5-4590/AMD FX 8350 equivalent or better
- Memory: 4GB+ RAM
- Output: HDMI 1.4, DisplayPort 1.2 or newer
- Inputs: 1x USB 2.0 or better port
- Operating system: Windows 7 SP1 or newer

Matt Miller's Top Ten Vive Experiences

1. Tilt Brush
2. The Lab
3. Audioshield
4. Vanishing Realms
5. Fantastic Contraption
6. Job Simulator
7. Budget Cuts Demo
8. Space Pirate Trainer VR
9. Final Approach
10. theBlu

I had to do some significant positional tweaking to get the base stations to recognize one another at first, but once the mounting was complete and the connection was established, the hard part of setup was over. Our play space had no other connected entertainment, but some users have noted that the base stations have the potential to interfere with other IR-based signals, which is something to be aware of if you plan to pair your VR space with a room that uses IR-based monitors and receiver remotes.

Connecting the headset and controllers is relatively straightforward, though tedious due to the many required connections. Between charge cables, link box power lines, and the expected array of HDMI and USB plugs, using the Vive requires a lot of wires cluttering your space.

The headset is a slick piece of tech, with a simple black aesthetic that newcomers might have a hard time distinguishing from the Rift. In fact, few core technical features set the two apart. Like the Rift, the combined eye resolution of 2,160x1,200, 90Hz refresh rate, and 110-degree field of view offer an impressive display, even if there is still some minor blurring. That resolution issue is the biggest reason I expect a Vive retrofit within a few years.

Three Velcro straps are easily adjustable for head size, and after inviting over a dozen adult volunteers to try it out, none complained that they couldn't find an appropriate fit. If you wear glasses, the Vive can work with smaller frames, but a couple of my volunteers complained that it wouldn't accommodate what they wore. The center of gravity is pulled in front, close to the eyes, which is more important than you might at first think, as many applications involve rapid head turns. In those moments, I rarely felt the headset pull away or shift on my face.

The headset is either on or off – it doesn't sit comfortably when propped up on your head between sessions. Thankfully, the front-facing pass-through camera gives you a room view without having to lift the lenses to your forehead. The headset hugs your eyes tightly, but isn't inherently uncomfortable. You rarely spy the outside world (which is nice), but the close fit and minimal venting cause heat to build up.

The headset's biggest problem is the connected 3-in-1 cables, which extend from the back and drop down to the floor behind you before running to your PC. HTC has done an impressive balancing job, so these wires don't feel like they pull your head backward, but there's no solving for the additional weight. The even bigger issue is tangled cords; many Vive applications involve constant walking and rotations, and the cords at my feet regularly got in the way, breaking immersion in the virtual world. I even pulled the cables unplugged a few times with bad steps, resulting in crashed apps. Until a wireless solution can be concocted, this is a big problem.

The built-in microphone is functional, but offers poor quality. I applaud the decision to include a standard 1/8-inch headphone jack on the headset, which allows users to incorporate their preferred headphones. I encountered no problems when connecting several different options, from simple earbuds to larger, over-ear models.

The oddly shaped wand controllers are responsive and ergonomic. Our units held charge for several hours, and recharged quickly using the included micro-USB cords. The controllers exhibit good connection to the base stations, though over many hours of play, the connection dropped out or fluttered a few times. The trackpad, trigger, and grip buttons are all responsive. Motion tracking is superlative, with almost no detectible lag as you move the controllers.

The Vive is undoubtedly the best option currently on the market for experiencing full-room virtual reality, and everything comes packed together in one well-organized package. But that package comes with a serious price tag. Not only is the Vive $200 more expensive than the competition at a hefty $799.99, but the PC hardware requirements are also significant. As such, it's not unreasonable to imagine the total Vive price tag topping $2,000 for some users without a high-end rig already in place.

Tilt Brush is a remarkable piece of software, as it holds the promise of an entirely new medium for artists

The Experience

With your base stations synced, your controllers charged, the furniture cleared away (and wires strewn about the floor), you're ready to don the Vive. But you're probably worried about your friends' and family's safety as they walk blindly into the virtual world. Steam and HTC have implemented a number of features to alleviate the concern, and it all works well.

By setting the controllers on the floor (to set the location of the floor in games) and then walking the controller around a circuit of the dedicated open floor space, you establish the chaperone bounds. Like any good chaperone, this system is in place to keep people from getting carried away, but without limiting too much of the fun. No matter the application, if your body (as measured by the headset's position) or either of the controllers get too close to a wall, a blue grid appears in your field of view warning you of the boundary. If that's not enough, you can also set additional options using the pass-through camera on the front of the unit, so that when the chaperone appears you also see an overlay of the real world. In short, I never found myself swinging an arm into a table or running into a wall.

With safety options set, I dug into the many experimental applications and games available through Steam. Valve has done a good job of including a brief but entertaining intro to interacting in virtual space, and after that you can freely move between applications, using either your standard desktop Steam application, or a virtual menu from within the headset. Starting and moving between applications is where I encountered the most problems, including several crashes that required restarting Steam. Sometimes applications would fail to start, and then inexplicably boot up on a second try. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was playing around in a pre-release sandbox of experiences, rather than a fully cooked retail front to the Vive software library.

One of the most polished experiences is also the best single piece of software to illustrate the Vive's potential: The Lab. This is a collection of minigames and interactions that are each delightful in their own way, from a simple arcade bullet-hell shooter in which your hand/controller is the ship, to a bow-and-arrow defense game that sees you shooting down innocuous stick-figure raiders as they assault your castle. Another sequence shows off the potential for visiting real-world locations through visits to mountain vistas and underground lava tubes, and another demonstrates VR's educational applications by examining a human skeletal system from any angle – including inside the body. Within The Lab, it's only a matter of seconds before most users "get it" and understand why folks are making such a fuss about VR's potential (read our full review on p. 85).

Many of the additional games currently available in Steam are experimental and brief, but not lacking in merit. The Space Pirate Trainer VR beta reveals the thrill of shooting guns in virtual reality. An early prologue to Irrational Exuberance finds you exploring outer space, crushing asteroids between your hands. And the engrossing Budget Cuts demo makes me hunger for a full game; you are a spy moving through a robot-infested office building, opening safes, climbing through crawlspaces, and flinging throwing knives with abandon. Like so much of the Vive catalog, these are unfinished products, but they do wonders in selling the future.

Job Simulator is simple and silly, but a great illustration of how the fun it can be to perform simple tasks picking up and throwing objects in a virtual space

Audioshield transforms any musical track into a playable virtual pattern of notes that punch and block in real time

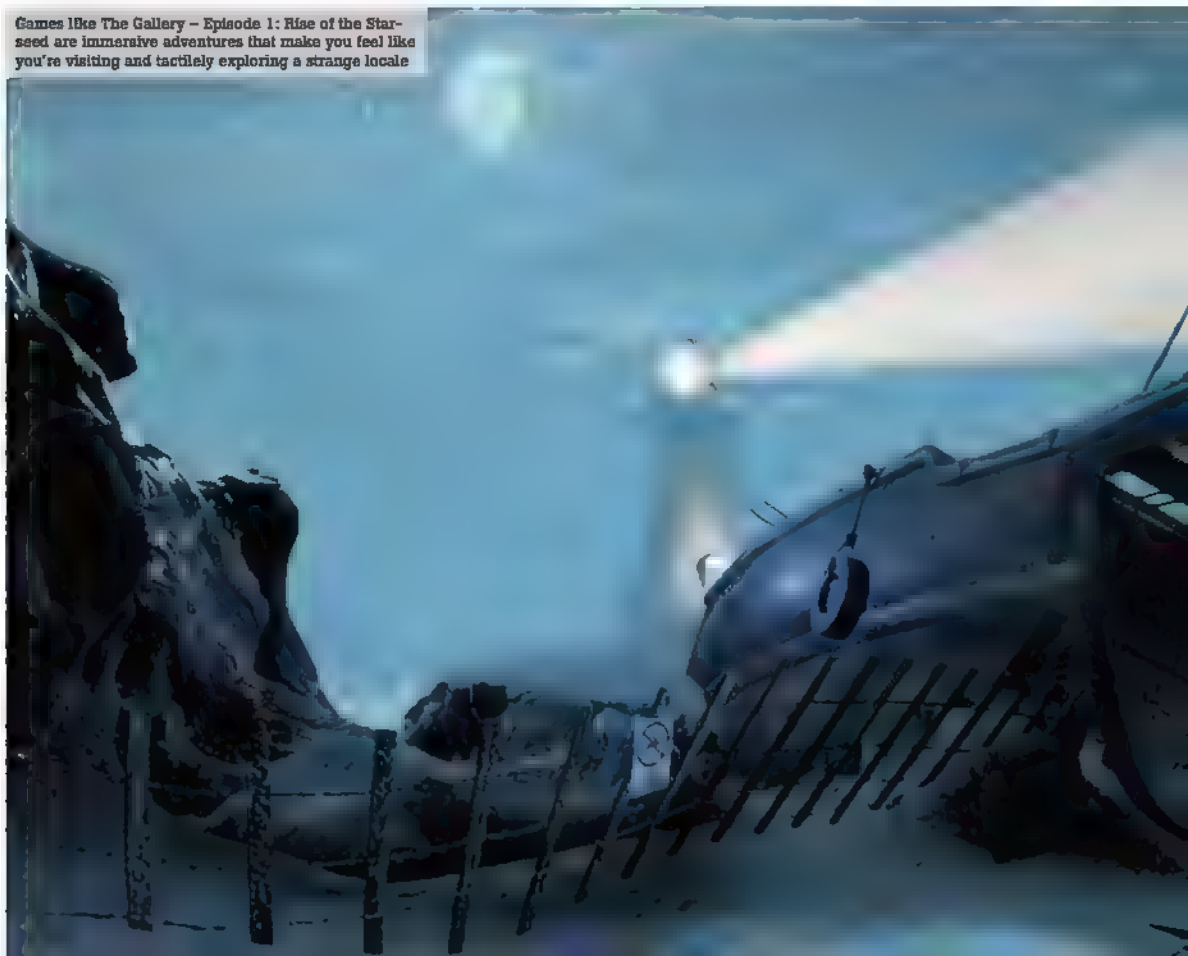
The prologue for Irrational Exuberance creates the illusion that you're traveling through space, crushing asteroids and interacting with stellar phenomena

These early experiences reveal one of Valve's biggest challenges: inconsistency. Rather than standardize what buttons do what, Valve has given game developers a broad latitude. Though it may encourage creative use of the headset and controllers, I felt a little lost moving between applications when each one uses different interaction models for simple things like confirmation/cancel buttons.

Other VR projects in Steam offer relatively complete (if brief) encounters in the virtual landscape. Job Simulator is as amusing as you may have heard, guiding you through a robot's vision of human careers like office worker and cook. It captures the magic of picking up and moving things within a virtual space (See our review on p.84). Another game called Final Approach offers an overhead view of an airport; I hovered, godlike, over the many converging planes and helicopters, guiding them with my hands onto the paths that led to safe landing. I was appropriately awed by the magic of theBlu, in which I was a mostly passive observer of undersea life as whales passed and anemones reacted to the brush of a hand. And an onstage encounter with La Peri placed me in the center of a breathtaking ballet performance in which I selected the conclusion, revealing VR's potential for presenting dance and theater in a new way.

The combination of 360-degree view and the ability to interact with my hands makes all the difference in these adventures. Even when the Vive feels less consumer-ready than the Rift, these enchanting interactions may be enough to lure many users away – at least until the Rift releases its own Touch interface in several months.

Several games available at launch provide the potent sense of immersion and presence that is so frequently touted by VR's evangelists. The early access fantasy RPG, Vanishing Realms, is a classic dungeon crawl complete with combat, puzzles, and loot. Looking around inside the fantasy landscape is like seeing a childhood fantasy come to life. The Gallery – Episode 1: Call of the Starseed is a mouthful of a name, but the sense that you're exploring a windswept coastline of shipwrecks in search



Games like The Gallery – Episode 1: Rise of the Starseed are immersive adventures that make you feel like you're visiting and tactilely exploring a strange locale

of your missing sister brings a new dynamic to the adventure game formula. The gleeful Fantastic Contraption challenges your engineering skills, giving you tools to craft a locomotive and the freedom to make the most complicated mix of wheels and frames that you can imagine. Moving and touching in these games is engaging and addictive – it's hard to get over the sense that you're walking around a space in which there's no separation between you and the fictional world. These first-person journeys are the most likely place that some users might encounter nausea or discomfort from movement, but it wasn't a problem I personally encountered during play.

Audioshield is a fascinating experiment weaving music games into the VR landscape. Wielding colored blue and red shields on each arm, the beats of a song fly in from varied trajectories, and score is calculated by how many beats you block with the correctly colored shield. Suggested songs explore an eclectic mix of electronica and a few outlying classical or pop tunes, but you can import your own music as well, or stream any music from Soundcloud. Without acknowledging the absent license, it's about as close as you can imagine to being inside that *Tron* game you've imagined since 1982. It also reveals that Vive is primed to appeal to a broad array of game genres (read our review on p. 82).

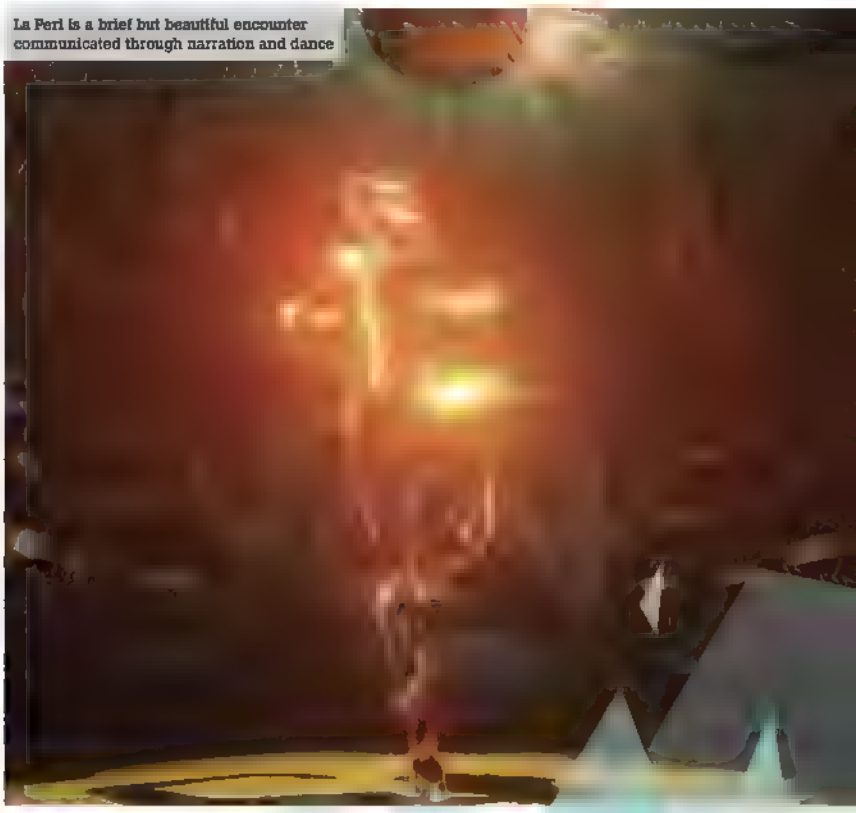
Oddly, my favorite VR experience with the Vive wasn't a game. It was Tilt Brush, Google's take on MS Paint reimagined for a virtual age. With one controller as a brush and the other as a palette, you're set loose to create. Swipes of your hand paint stripes in 3D space and bring fire, smoke, and other effects into being. Afterward, you walk around your creation, and realize this is as much statue as it is a painting. A showcase allows users to load up art installations created by other artists, and even watch a time-lapsed version of those pieces as they come to life one virtual stroke at a time. It's remarkable, and I don't feel like I'm exaggerating when I say this is a new art medium.

The Conclusion

The Vive feels like it could use a few more months in the oven, but I can understand the desire to hit the market in-time with its major competitor. As it is, potential buyers should enter with an expectation of some challenges, both in setup and actual use. Game crashes are uncommon, but not rare. Controls and usage are inconsistent from one app to another. Many apps feel more like experiments than finished products.

Nonetheless, after spending many hours exploring both the Rift and the Vive, I'm forced to acknowledge that as of launch, the Vive does more to sell me on the potential of this new medium. Again and again, I found myself amazed by the deeply immersive and varied adventures I found there, and the option to touch and move freely is a big deal.

The virtual-reality marketplace is likely to look very different by the end of this year. Oculus has promised its Touch controllers by then, which should offer many of the deeper VR interactions that so appealed to me with the Vive. Simultaneously, I have no doubt that Valve and HTC are going to be hard at work to iron out the kinks in its presentation and tech with the Vive – I fully expect a smoother experience after a few more firmware updates.



La Peri is a brief but beautiful encounter communicated through narration and dance

The Final Grade

In its current state, the Vive has numerous stumbling blocks and a spotty library of applications. But don't let my final assessment come across with too much pessimism. This is certainly a passing grade, and all my intuition suggests that with some consistent work, this student has the potential for real brilliance. Excellent motion tracking, flexible controllers, and the most novel experiences I've encountered in VR await for Vive users, but some rough spots in setup and execution, along with a currently limited library of apps and games, hold it back from greatness.

C+

READY, PLAYER ONE

Gearing up for the VR revolution? Check out these Rift-ready PC models

by Ben Reeves

Being on the cutting edge of technology is never cheap. That maxim definitely holds true for virtual reality, where you must combine the high cost of the headset along with some beefy PC specs to get the games running. Get carried away with the specs and you could find yourself dropping well over $3,000 for the combo.

Long-time PC players can upgrade their existing rigs using the tech specifications outlined in our Rift and Vive reviews, but newcomers or PC owners in need of a serious upgrade have another option. If you pre-order the Oculus Rift, the company is offering discounted Rift-ready PCs that start as low as $949. These slim PCs allow for limited upgradability, but they do get your foot in the virtual door. Sadly, neither of these PCs come bundled with a mouse, keyboard, or monitor so that's another expense you might have to factor in if you don't already have them.

We got our hands on units from Alienware and Asus and put the systems through the paces to find out how they stack up.

Alienware X51 R3

Measuring only 13.5 x 12.5 x 3.74 inches, Alienware's console-sized VR-ready unit can slide onto just about any shelf and sit horizontally or vertically. The system's curvy design and raised alien lettering make this one slick-looking machine. You can even customize the two triangular LED strips on the side to match your flair.

Starting at $999 (with purchase of a Rift) alienware.com

Starting Specs

- Video Card: Nvidia GeForce GTX 970 4GB
- Processor: Intel Core i5 6400 Processor
- Memory: 8GB Dual Channel DDR4 at 2,133MHz
- Hard Drive: 1TB (64MB Cache)
- OS: Windows 10 Home

Benchmarks

- PC Mark: 3,536 (better than 75 percent of PCs tested)
- 3D Mark: 2,491
- Average framerate in Metro 2033 on max settings: 36.33

Asus ROG G20CB

Asus' sharp design helps it stand out from other PCs, but its VR-ready specs are on par with the Alienware. However, the G20CB saw a slight performance boost thanks to its extra memory. The sleek design also resulted in a machine that is slightly larger, measuring 13.3 x 14.09 x 4.09 inches. The system's dynamic LED backlights let you highlight the front, back, and undercarriage with over 8 million different color combinations.

Starting at $949 (with purchase of a Rift) asus.com

Starting Specs

- Video Card: Nvidia GeForce GTX 970 4GB
- Processor: Intel Core i5 6400 Processor
- Memory: 16GB DDR4 at 2,133MHz
- Hard Drive: 512GB SSD
- OS: Windows 10 Home

Benchmarks

- PC Mark: 3,961 (better than 88 percent of PCs tested)
- 3D Mark: 2,531
- Average framerate in Metro 2033 on max settings: 31.33

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Surviving The Trip Downriver

What's next for The Molasses Flood?

In February 2014, the video game industry was surprised by the announcement that Irrational Games was being shuttered. Ernest Dowling, who had served as the lead level designer on Bioshock Infinite, decided he wanted to work on his own project instead of jumping into another triple-A industry job and sought to establish a team with Irrational's former art director, Scott Sinclair. Soon, the Boston-based developer The Molasses Flood was formed, composed of Dowling, Sinclair, and four other game-industry veterans whose credits include working on the Rise of Rock Band, Halo 5, and Freedom Force.

This was not simply a hobby project. Instead, everyone went all in, living off of a combination of savings and severance pay while working full time on their game. By May, they had a playable demo ready to show off at PAX East, and by October, they launched a Kickstarter campaign to help fund the game's development. The Kickstarter debut in October of the same year. If the campaign failed, there's a good chance the game would not have been developed and all those months of hard work would have been for nothing. Luckily for the team, the Kickstarter was a huge success, raising more than $100,000 over its funding goal of $150,000. The group continued to work away on the game, using feedback from backers and Steam early access users to improve and refine it, until it was ready for release. Now, a little over two years after Irrational's closure, The Molasses Flood is finally seeing the fruits of its labor and is trying to figure out its next journey. ***by Javy Gwaltney***

The Flame in the Flood currently sits at a 73 Metacritic rating and has proven to be a divisive game, with critics taking issue with its challenging difficulty and similarity to other survival sims like Don't Starve. Other reviewers, like me, found the unique setting and steady sense of progression (even in its most difficult moments) helped make it stand out in the crowd. The Molasses Flood is pleased with the reception, according to Dowling: "Critically, it landed about where we expected it to. I sort of expected there to be a bit of a spread as that goes, but I was happy to see that the user review scores were really positive. We got some great reviews, and we continue to see them trickle in from smaller outlets."

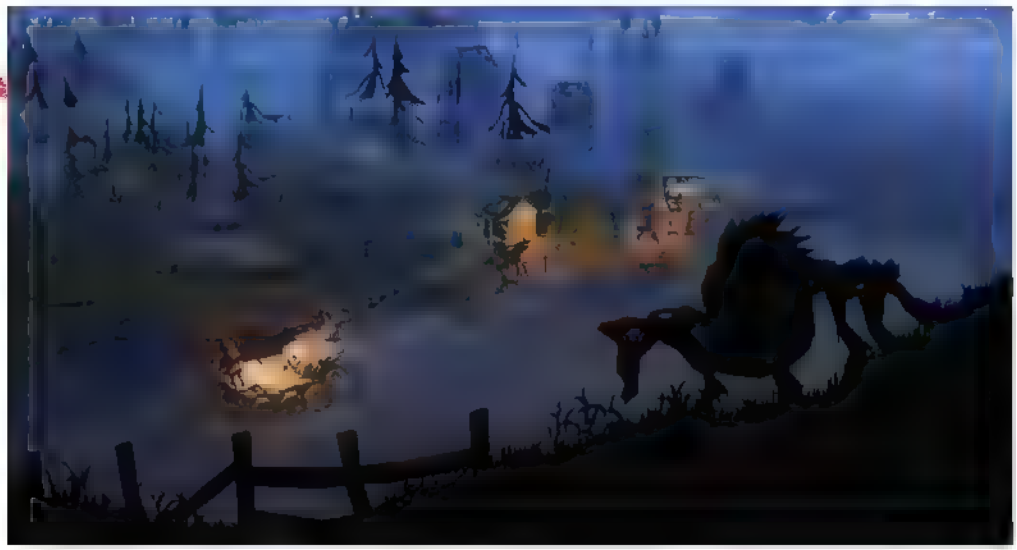
Though the critical response for The Flame in the Flood was satisfying, Dowling admits it hasn't exactly been a blockbuster seller, though he attributes that more to the concept of value in the age of digital distribution more than anything else. "As far as sales go, we're reasonably happy with it. We're obviously not the new ultra-rich indie people, but I think that's just sort of how it is these days for most independent titles that launch. I think a lot of people hold off until they see something that's on sale."

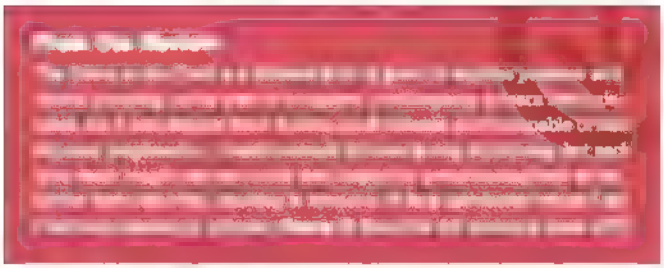
His reasoning isn't unfounded. The openness of digital-distribution platforms like Steam have proven to be a double-edged sword for indie developers. It's never been easier to get your game into a marketplace somewhere to sell it, but that also means it's harder than ever to get people to notice it given just how many titles come out every day. Not every indie game can enjoy the financial success of Undertale or Stardew Valley, both of which have sold over a million copies. However, Dowling isn't discouraged as much as he is curious. "I'm really interested to see how the shape of independent games' sales take over time because I think it is quite a bit different than what we tend to be used to in triple-A and big titles, which have enormous marketing pushes. With smaller titles you tend to see less of a push but more of a longer tail."

The Molasses Flood attributes a large part of The Flame in the Flood's critical successes to its stint on Steam early access, saying its slow release allowed them to address issues and make adjustments as they developed content. "It was great since we didn't have a huge, expensive QA department," Dowling tells us. "It definitely led to a lot of changes and refinements and polish and a bunch of small additions and changes to the UI."

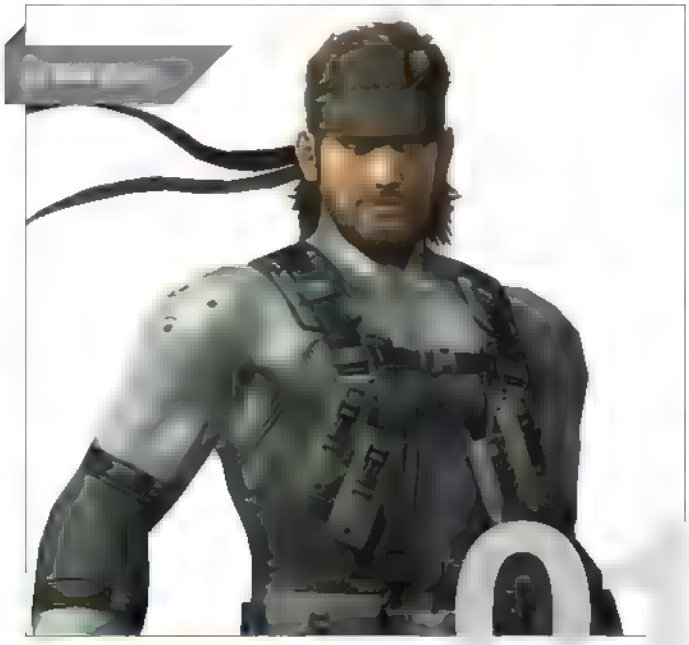
Though early access helped make The Flame in the Flood's development an easier ride than some of the triple-A projects members of the team have worked on, it wasn't always smooth sailing, with Dowling half-joking that the team "kind of lived in the office for a few months." The work's not over either. Not only is The Molasses Flood still updating the PC and Xbox One versions of the game with fixes, they team is also still implementing Kickstarter pledge rewards. When I asked about the possibility of a PS4 port or downloadable content, he said the focus is on patching the game as best as they can and taking care of all the content the team is obligated to finish.

As for as what's next for The Molasses Flood, Dowling admits everyone is still trying to figure out the next move. "We have all sorts of stuff in play right now. It's too early to say anything about what that may be, but there are a lot of possibilities as to what we might do." The Molasses Flood might once again turn to crowdfunding for its next project or, if the scope of the idea is too large, Dowling says they'd need investors to help them realize it. Regardless of what the future holds for the team of six, The Molasses Flood took a chance with the possibilities offered by the current digital landscape and have by all accounts survived a long journey through treacherous waters.





Stealth Masters



Solid Snake

Metal Gear Solid

This elite operative specializes in solo infiltration, so avoiding detection is paramount. With an arsenal including sleep darts, smoke grenades, and a variety of cardboard boxes, Solid Snake saves the world from nuclear Armageddon and no one even knows he was there.

Agent 47

Hitman

Whether he's strangling his target with a fiber wire, or taking them down with his dual silverballers, Agent 47 is swift and silent. He is also talented at covering up kills to appear as accidents and uses many disguises.

Garrett

Thief

Garrett is an experienced thief, and remaining hidden is what he does best. This cynical and arrogant crook works alone, while skillfully arching his bow and arrow to distract enemies and extinguish torches.

Altaïr

Assassin's Creed

Raised as an assassin from birth, Altaïr can blend into crowds seamlessly, air assassinate guards, and hide in haystacks to avoid detection. He was the first assassin introduced in the series, and remains the stealthiest.

Sam Fisher

Splinter Cell

With his instantly recognizable three-lensed night vision goggles, Sam Fisher is an adept, stealthy field operative. He's mostly a creature of the night, sneaking up on foes in the dark and engaging in both unarmed and armed combat.

Corvo Attano

Dishonored

Corvo is a former bodyguard to the empress. With his impressive natural and supernatural abilities, such as teleportation and possession, you can either kill your foes or stick to the shadows, though stealth is subtly encouraged.

Adam Jensen

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

Being half machine, Adam has augmentations that amp up his stealth capabilities, such as letting him turn invisible. Stealth is only one way Adam can approach missions, but he's so good that it's often the most rewarding.

Ninja

Mark of the Ninja

After accepting the Mark, the ninja develops superhuman powers that enhance his reflexes and senses. He agilely tiptoes through the world, killing, luring, or evading his enemies while avoiding lights and remaining silent.

Rikimaru

Tenchu

Trained as a ninja from a young age after the assassination of his family, Rikimaru possesses many stealth skills. Whether he's striking from the shadows or dropping balls of poisoned rice, he always gets the job done.

Talion

Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor

As a ranger Talion is a skilled fighter who has multiple stealth finisher moves, including undetected take-downs with his dagger. His superhuman abilities empower him further though many of these skills put emphasis on action.

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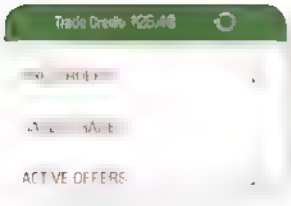

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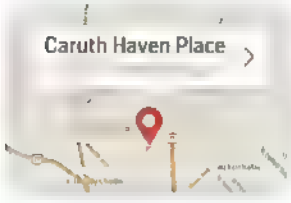

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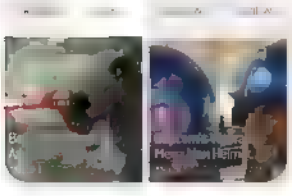

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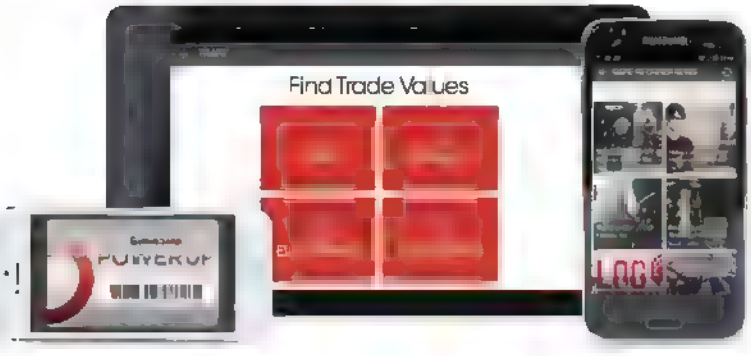

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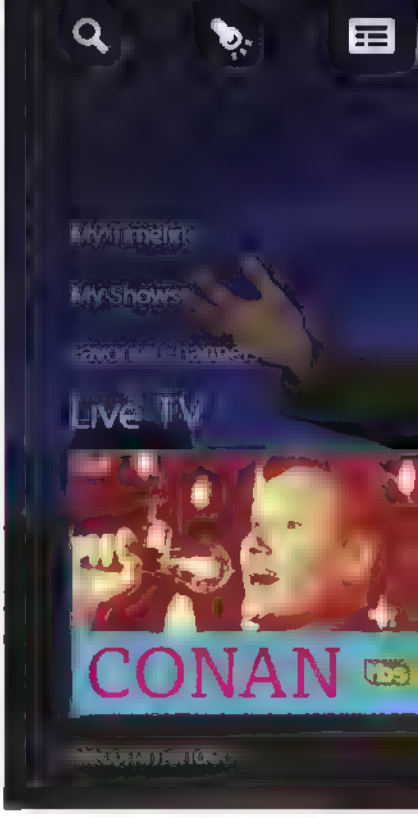
Cutting The Cord With PlayStation Vue

Sony's streaming TV service is a compelling alternative to cable

by Matthew Eatl



Home consoles have long strived to be the centers of entertainment in our living rooms. From the breakthrough DVD functionality of the PlayStation 2 to current systems' ability to stream content via apps, we use our consoles as more than just game-playing machines. The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have also taken steps into television content, allowing users to flirt with cutting the cord from a possibly pricey cable subscription.

Last year, PlayStation started a limited trial of streaming TV service PlayStation Vue in select markets. Now Vue has rolled out nationwide, and it is a compelling alternative to cable with an attractive range of channels and even cloud-based DVR functionality. How does PS Vue actually work, and is it worth it? I tested out the service via its full-featured, free seven-day trial, and it convinced me to make the switch.

What You Need

Vue requires a PlayStation account (but you don't need PlayStation Plus); a PS4, PS3, Chromecast*, or Amazon Fire TV device; a TV; and an Internet connection. On this last point, Sony suggests a minimum connection of 10mbps, plus 5mbps for every additional stream (more on that later).

I tested the service on connections significantly above 10mbps, so you'll have to take your connection in consideration. Even with a good Internet connection, when I switched to a channel, the picture appears at a lower resolution for up to 20 seconds before the stream's true HD resolution pops in. The service uses adaptive bitrate streaming, so there are times the picture quality dips even though it might not stutter. In my time with Vue I only encountered one viewing session when the picture stuttered occasionally.

Finally, be aware that Vue requires more data than just surfing the net, so double check if you have a data cap and any resultant penalties for going over it.

Pick A Plan

PlayStation Vue offers three plans to choose from, none of which require any kind of monthly or yearly subscription or commitment – a big advantage over cable or satellite. Similarly, the price of the packages don't fluctuate or rise after an initial period. What you see is what you get. However, one small detail worth noting is you will not receive a partial refund if you cancel during the month. The service auto-renews each month, so if you don't want it to do this, be sure to change your auto-pay settings in the main PS4 settings menu.

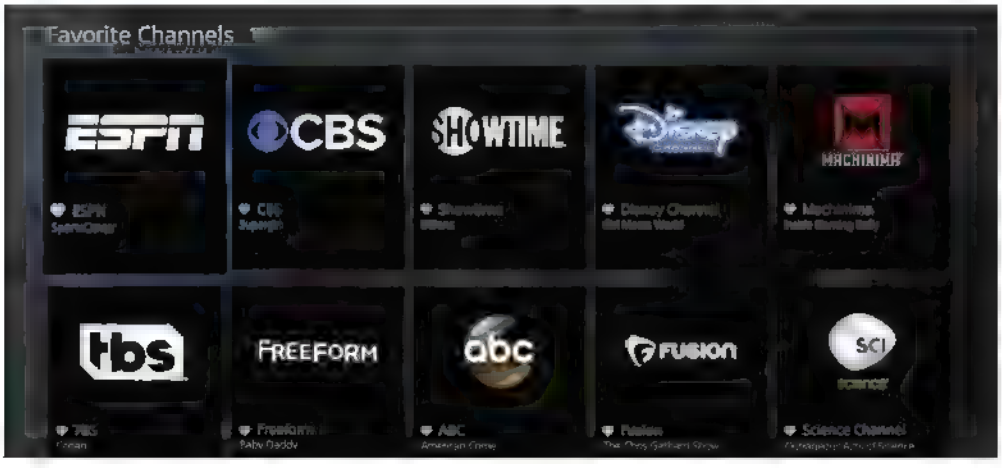
- *Access Slim – $29.99* (55+ channels)
- *Core Slim – $34.99* (70+ channels)
- *Elite Slim – $44.99* (100+ channels)

The vast majority of Vue's 210 markets across all 50 states do not have access to their local channels, although the service offers on-demand content for Fox, ABC, and NBC. If you're in the New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Dallas, San Francisco, or Miami markets you get your local channels, and accordingly packages in these markets start at $39.99. If you don't live in one of those big seven areas, you can always pull down your local channels with an HD antenna – although Vue's cloud DVR will not record over-the-air content.

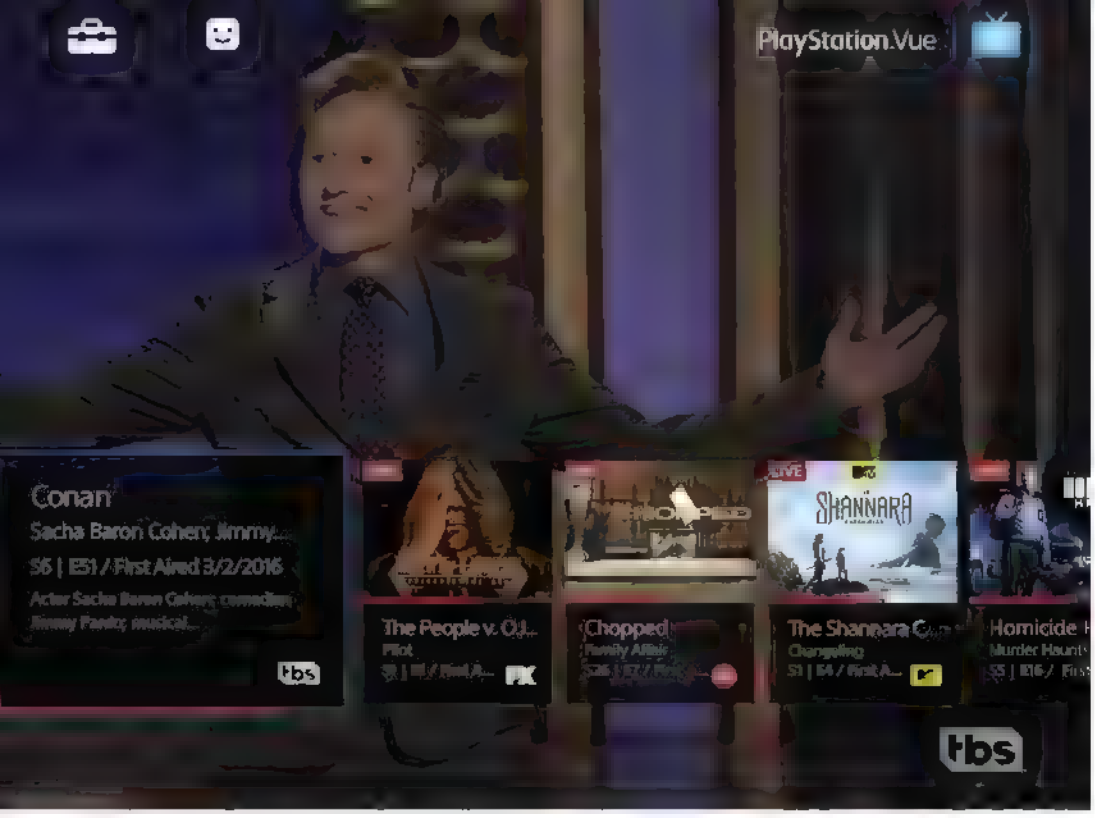
The lineup of Vue channels throughout all the packages is surprisingly adequate, even at the lower Access tier, which includes channels such as AMC, Comedy Central, two ESPN channels, three Disney channels, FX, NBC Sports Network, and more.

The Core package adds more niche networks such as IFC and Sundance, and layers on more sports content – including regional sports channels. The latter is significant for sports fans who want to see their local sports teams live (league blackouts may still apply) that wouldn't otherwise be shown on the over-the-air, local channels, on a national broadcast such as ESPN, or through an app.

Finally, the Elite package adds even more specialized channels, as well as a few "premium" offerings such as Epix Hits. The latter – as well as Showtime, Fox Soccer Plus, and Machinima – are available to all Vue users as add-ons. These additional channels also include reduced monthly prices for those with an active PlayStation Plus subscription.



*Users must sign up for Vue on a PS4/PS3 or Fire TV device, while after that an iOS device and/or Chromecast device can be used to watch it



Getting Around

Making your way around the service is pretty easy, featuring categories you scroll through vertically and which when highlighted expand horizontally. Ignoring the repetitive categories designed merely to surface content for you (such as Timeline, Recommended, and Featured), getting at the shows you want to watch is easy. My Shows (more on scheduling show recordings and Vue's cloud-based DVR function later) and Favorite Channels naturally contain any content you've marked as such.

Vue's interface also features a normal search bar you type into (with the PlayStation Store's as-you-go predictive interface) as well as an Explore feature that lets you peruse by selecting more general perimeters such as genre, age rating, popularity, etc. You can set up to five different profiles on one account, each with their own favorite shows and channels, but there are no parental controls or ways to restrict access to someone else's profile.

The best part of Vue's user experience and interface is the channel guide. Not only does it show five channels at once and what's on in any given four-hour timespan, but you can scroll into the past and future and set up recordings. The guide is easy to look at and understand, and it gives episode titles for most shows, which is handy when wondering if an episode is new or not.

Vue's Difference Maker – DVR Functionality

One of the things that makes Vue different than other ways to view content on your home console is its cloud-based DVR functionality. Unlike the paid and free apps you can download on the system that feature content that's already culled, the Vue lets you add any shows (up to 500) to the cloud DVR from the guide to your My Shows category. By way of comparison, the Xbox One has a DVR tuner, but it only records over-the-air content regardless of that unit's ability to show cable content via a pass-through connection.

Furthermore, the guide features Catch Up shows, which you can watch from up to three days in the past. By my unofficial tally, I'd say about 30 percent of the channels in my Core package offered Catch Up shows. Furthermore, when you mark content for My Shows, not only does Vue's DVR set up a schedule of future recordings, it also gives you any of that show's Catch Up content. The limitations to Catch Up shows are that you can't fast-forward through some of them, and only some of them let you rewind. The lack of the ability to fast-forward through Catch Up programs not only means you can't skip commercials, but if for some reason you have to leave a Catch Up show and return to it later, you have to re-watch from the beginning.

While Vue's DVR capabilities are an asset for the service, it doesn't offer the functionality of some other DVRs on the market. You cannot ask for custom show schedules (such as only recording new episodes), arrange anual recordings according to a specific times, or set up pre- and post-time slot buffer zones (helpful for sporting events in the case of overtime, for example). Given that it's cloud-based and not a physical hard drive, shows can only be stored for 28 days, and the pause buffer is 30 minutes. It will be interesting to see if Sony starts selling cloud storage for Vue users who want to keep shows for longer periods. Despite some of the limitations of the service's DVR functionality, it does allow you to record multiple shows at once. I don't know if there's a limit on this, but I recorded six shows at once, and perhaps I could have done more.

Vue Away From Home

Vue also adds extra features like supporting authentication for 60 remote apps, which lets you use your Vue membership info to access specific channel apps for viewing on other devices. Similarly, the PlayStation Vue mobile app lets you watch Vue content for select channels as long as you're inside your home location (the IP address when you first sign up). The service doesn't work across multiple IP addresses, and although you can switch your home location once, you can't sign in through a different location.

The mobile app doesn't support the content of 19 channels (from the likes of Bravo, Syfy, NBC Sports, and more), and when you're outside your home location you can watch selected live TV, on-demand, and catch up content, but not DVR shows. Content that's unwatchable in these situations is listed as "mobile restricted."

Apart from watching Vue shows on the mobile app, it supports casting with Chromecast (where you throw content on your Chromecast onto a TV) and you can use up to five TVs with a single Vue account in your house. The caveat here is you can't use Vue on two PS4s or two PS3, but it would work with a PS4 and PS3, for instance.

The Verdict

Depending on your Internet connection and preferred channels, PlayStation Vue could be an attractive service if you're looking to lower your monthly content bill and cancel your subscription to expensive carriers such as Comcast, Dish, or DirecTV. Not only do Vue's robust-yet-pared-down channel selection prevent you from paying for lots of content you do not want, but the cloud-DVR functionality doesn't come with a monthly DVR rental fee. Moreover, the lack of a contract means you could come and go from the service as you like (useful around specific events or times such as sports season).

In my personal case, I benefit greatly from Vue. I used to pay over $130 dollars a month just for satellite service, a DVR rental, and HBO, but because Vue has regional sports channels, I've made the switch. Even after factoring in having to get a subscription to HBO Now to cover losing that channel and an HD antenna, I've still cut my monthly bill in more than half since I switched over to Vue. I've had to sacrifice a few channels, the occasional hiccup in quality due to streaming, and some DVR functionality, but it's worth it for the savings. And should I become dissatisfied with Vue for some reason – if the service drops channels or changes fundamentally – I can always go crawling back to satellite thanks to Vue's lack of a contract. After all, that dish on my roof isn't going anywhere.

Nintendo Still Denies Us Metroid, But Other Options Surge In Promise

Despite raucous cries from the fanbase, Nintendo hasn't released a new 2D Metroid title since Metroid: Zero Mission in 2004. Fortunately, the independent game scene has picked up the slack; we've seen a renaissance of great gear-gated exploration games in recent years, and the trend is certainly ongoing. A little over a year ago, we took a close look at two of the most promising of these titles, which were both still early in development. Now that some time has passed, I returned to both to see how they're shaping up in advance of their releases in the coming months.

Heart Forth, Alicia is suffused with charm. Screens from the long-in-development project call to mind old-school 2D platformers. However, the project draws on a broad array of inspirations to fuel its story, gameplay, and mechanics. Creator Alonso Martin cites titles like Xenogears for its deep storytelling, Final Fantasy Tactics for world-building, and The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time for its creative items, puzzles, and dungeons.

My time with a recent build surprised me. The Metroid and Castlevania influences are apparent from the outset, but the intro puts a big focus on storytelling and dialogue threads. After a conversation, I even saw emotion bubbles popping up to indicate how a character felt about the interaction. The story follows a young wizard named Alicia as she is flung from her home, and the plot is communicated with sincerity, aided by a wonderful and whimsical musical score. Characters don't fall into classic good and evil roles, and Martin tells me that later acts take a dark turn, in contrast to the seemingly breezy visuals.

Recent months have seen a host of improvements, including a new widescreen aspect ratio, additional dungeons, expanded areas, and a host of cinematic cutscenes to increase the focus on storytelling. A new spell-switching system (modeled after Secret of Mana) makes it easy to combine spells in unique ways, useful for solving puzzles and confronting the many unusual bosses. I was smitten by the mix of tight, responsive 2D combat and exploration, especially with such interesting level design and character development.

I'm also intrigued by the grand scope of Martin's vision for this story. He claims that Heart Forth, Alicia is the fourth part of a broader story, and a live-action filmed element tells more of the tale (planned for release after the game's launch). I'm eager to see the full game when it releases on PS4, Vita, Wii U, and potentially 3DS sometime between late 2016 and early 2017.

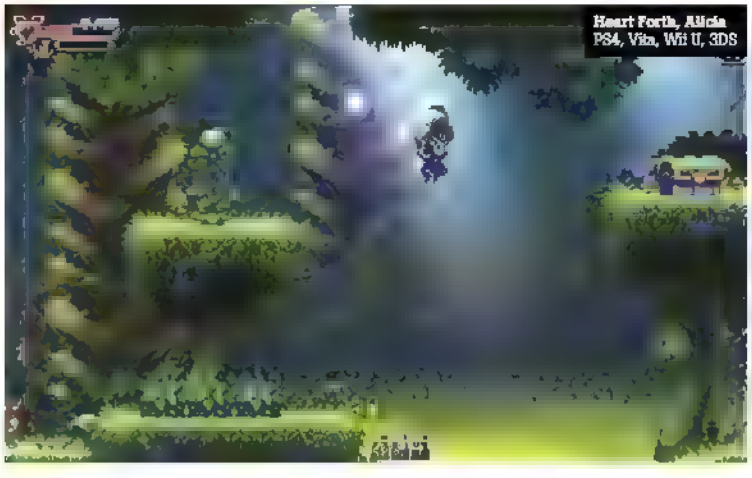
Ghost Song has seen a similarly robust set of improvements since last year. Developer Matt White of Old Moon Games cites a dramatic overhaul to the story, in which he has stripped out much of the extraneous dialogue to create a more isolated, mysterious experience. The game is also now running in 1080p, and the sharp visuals look great.

Here, the Super Metroid inspiration is readily apparent, from the crashed ship on an alien planet that opens the game to the tone of the music and graphics. White also cites Dark Souls as a strong inspiration in the way it demands deliberate movement and careful exploration while presenting enigmatic story that unfolds through ambient events and quizzical NPCs.

That was certainly the experience I discovered as I confronted a recent in-progress version of the game. Ghost Song is currently tuned to present a high challenge, with rare save checkpoints, and zombie-like monsters that can devastate your character in just a few shots. Much of gameplay focuses on managing cooldowns and other resources, including the recharging battery of your main cannon, the repowering armor that protects your health, and a limited use of your dash energy.

The alien planet is strange and disturbing, filled with mutating beasts, mysterious plants, and numerous darkened corridors, breakable walls, and hidden paths. Occasional NPC encounters begin to establish what's going on, but you're always left with a disquieting sense regarding who you are and why you're on the planet.

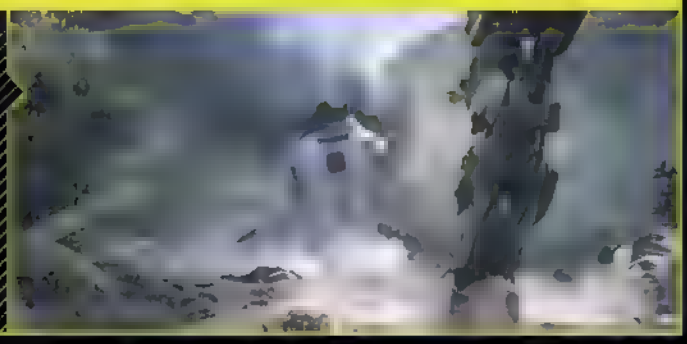
Only the opening areas of Ghost Song were available in the build I played, but I'm excited to play some of the later encounters that White has described. One locale is an outdoor area filled with floating terrain, but killing the source of the terrain permanently changes the map of the area. Another region is directly inspired by Alien: Isolation, and features an evil robot stalking you. Ghost Song is targeting a launch on PC this fall or winter, but White is hopeful about console iterations to follow.



The Good

TITANFALL 2

has been officially announced via a teaser trailer from developer Respawn Entertainment. The brief clip shows off a jungle setting and a titan with an impressive sword.



The Bad

OCULUS RIFT

kicks off the latest round of virtual reality ignominiously. Many of those who pre-ordered the unit — even in the early hours of its availability — got delay notices unexpectedly mere days before launch. The revised shipping window could be pushed back by a month or more. Oculus isn't expecting new orders (as of April) to go out until August.

Oculus says the delay is due to an unexpected component shortage, but that the company has increased production and is covering shipping and handling costs for all orders placed before April 1, 2016.

Meanwhile, HTC/Valve's Vive VR device had its own hiccup. Some customers' orders were automatically canceled due to an unspecified processing problem with financial institutions.

The Ugly

ROCKSTAR GAMES

is involved in a vicious legal battle with former Rockstar North (Grand Theft Auto series) president Leslie Benzies. The dispute is over an unpaid $150 million bonus Benzies claims he is owed from the company. Benzies says he was barred from returning to work after taking a sabbatical and the terms of his royalties were re-worked. Rockstar and principals Sam and Dan Houser say Benzies is in breach of his contract, and they dispute his departure and naturally, the amount of money owed.

Quotable

"I'm not a big fan of Xbox One and a half. If we're going to move forward, I want to move forward in big numbers."

← **Xbox One head Phil Spencer** addresses whether there will be an updated Xbox One in light of reports that Sony is planning a "PlayStation 4.5"

TEACHING KIDS TO CODE, ONE HOUR AT A TIME

by Jeff Marchiafava

Educators are making a concerted effort to get kids engaged in computer science, and they're using video games to do it.

For many children, the dream of making their own video game is almost as enticing as playing them. While most kids may underestimate the herculean efforts involved in video game development, educators are viewing the inherent interest as an opportunity to give their young students a head start in one of the most lucrative and fastest-growing career fields in the country: computer science. Hour of Code is a nationwide initiative created by nonprofit organization Code.org to teach kids and young adults the fundamentals of computer programming by turning the learning the process into one big game.

The Building Blocks Of The Future

One only has to look around to see the important role that computer science plays in our daily lives. Websites, social media, and apps have become nearly omnipresent thanks to the exponential growth-rate of technology and explosive rise of smartphones. Our hunger for digital entertainment and enhancements has in turn created a major demand for programmers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there will be more than 1 million computing jobs left open in the U.S. in 2024 due to the lack of qualified applicants. One of the factors of this shortage is that currently only 25 percent of K-12 schools in the U.S. offer computer programming courses. That's where Hour of Code comes in – but how do you get kids interested in a profession that has long been viewed as technical and boring?

Pulling Out The Big Guns

Not only is each Hour of Code lesson presented to kids as a series of game challenges, but they feature some surprisingly popular faces thanks to the support of high-profile franchises like Star Wars, Minecraft, Angry Birds, and Disney's Frozen. Code.org has also enlisted the help of programming gurus like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Valve's Gabe Newell to introduce lessons and share their thoughts about computer science. Here are a few of the lessons children can partake in:

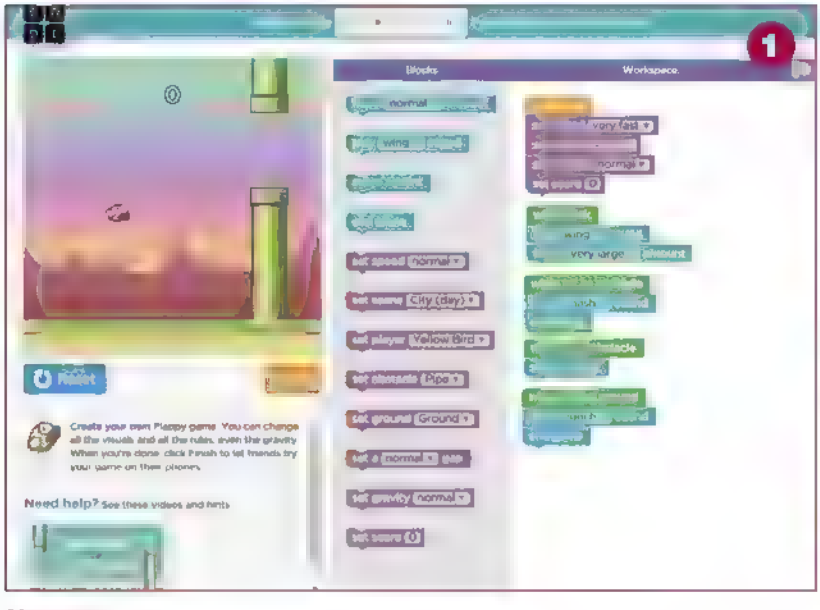
1. Make A Flappy Game – This beginner's lesson allows players to edit Dong Nguyen's infamous Flappy Bird to create their own custom version of the game. All the programming is handled by moving and dipping together "coding blocks," which allow players to change the scene, sound effects, game speed, and more. Once done, you can send a URL of your custom version of the game to friends to play on their phones or web browsers.

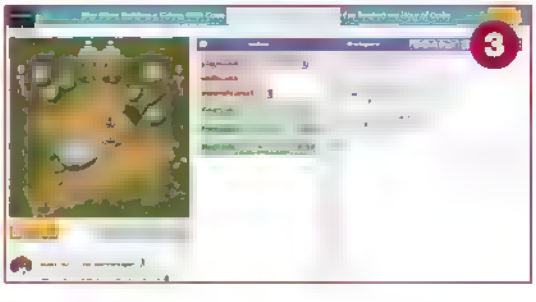
2. Minecraft Hour Of Code – Code.org's Minecraft lesson has players programming Steve or Alex to perform many of the various tasks that Minecraft fans are accustomed to. Once again, players use coding blocks to compile commands such as walking, mining blocks, and shearing sheep. A "Show Code" button displays the actual javascript commands that players are using behind the scenes, and later levels teach more advanced programming functions like loops and if/then statements.

Beyond The First Hour

Every Hour of Code lesson ends with an option for the student to print out a certificate of completion with his or her name on it. If the sense of achievement leaves your child eager for more programming challenges, Code.org offers a variety of more advanced lessons, as well as partnership trials for other websites that teach coding through games. Hour of Code graduates still won't be ready to program their own dream game, but – as virtually any educator will tell you – walking away with a needed interest in computer science is a valuable first step.

3. Star Wars: Building A Galaxy With Code – An amalgamation of the original trilogy and *The Force Awakens*, Code.org's Star Wars lesson expands on the principles learned in previous lessons. Early levels involve programming BB-8 to navigate obstacles similar to the Minecraft lessons, but soon you'll be adding allies and enemies to the scenario, creating your own scoring structure, and programming R2-D2 to respond to your key commands in real-time. The Building A Galaxy lesson can be programmed through code blocks, or by typing out the actual javascript code.


1
Blocks
Workspace
Create your own Flappy game. You can change all the visuals and all the rules, even the gravity. When you're done, click Finish to let friends try your game on their phones.
Need help? See these videos and hints



I CAN DO
THE FATALITY
WITH ANY
CHARACTER
NOT JUST A
MESSY LOOK
FLEXIBLE PASTE.
AXE
STYLING
MESSY LOOK
FLEXIBLE PASTE
SHAPESHIFT ANYTIME.
ANYWHERE.
AXE
FIND YOUR MAGIC.

FROM SCREEN TO SILVER SCREEN

A slew of gaming icons are heading to theaters this year. We look at some of the biggest names

Video games have challenged and inspired generations of players. Movies based on games? Not so much. It's no secret that games have had a curiously difficult transition from the interactive space to more passive forms of entertainment, with the results spanning from tolerable *(Silent Hill)* to nearly unwatchable (every other video game movie). As long as audiences bother showing up, however, studios will continue running beloved gaming IP through the meat grinder.

This year, however, something seems a little different. There's a chance some of the films coming in 2016 might actually be (gasp) pretty good. That's definitely a change from tradition, and it's been a long time coming. Here are several that look as though they might break the unenviable streak that video game movies have established.

- Sly Cooper *(2016)*
- Uncharted *(June 2017)*
- Five Nights at Freddy's *(TBA)*
- Minecraft *(TBA)*
- The Last of Us *(TBA)*

01 02 03 04 05

Ratchet & Clank
April 29

This animated film tells the story of the original PlayStation 2 game from 2002, showing how the Lombax mechanic Ratchet met up with his little buddy, the robot Clank. It does break from that timeline, however, introducing audiences to Doctor Nefarious, from the 2004 game Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal. Voice actors from the game, including James Arnold Taylor (Ratchet), David Kaye (Clank), Jim Ward (Captain Qwark), and Armin Shimerman (Doctor Nefarious), are joined by Hollywood talents such as Paul Giamatti, John Goodman, Rosario Dawson, and Sylvester Stallone. The movie was written by former Insomniac scribe T.J. Fixman, and directed by Kevin Munroe – perhaps best known for his 2007 reboot of *TMNT*.

The Angry Birds Movie
May 20

The characters from Rovio's action puzzler didn't have much to say in the games, but that hasn't stopped the upcoming animated film from attracting an all-star cast of voice talent. Jason Sudeikis, Josh Gad, Danny McBride, Maya Rudolph, Bill Hader, and Hannibal Buress are just a few of the big names. Peter Dinklage is in it, too; perhaps this will be a redemptive arc for him after his appearance in the execrable Pixels. You can expect plenty of action, as the Angry Birds battle their porcine counterparts. If it seems like a slim setup, remember – they said the same thing about *The Lego Movie*.

Warcraft
June 10

When *Warcraft* hits theaters in June, it will be a few months past the 10-year anniversary of the project's announcement. World of Warcraft fandom may have cooled a bit over that decade, but the film's swords-and-sorcery action is universal, even if you didn't spend hours raiding (or manipulating prices in the auction house). Travis Fimmel *(Vikings)* and Paula Patton *(Mission Impossible – Ghost Protocol)* star as a human knight and half-orc caught in a world-changing conflict as a portal links the world of Azeroth with the orc homeland Draenor. It's directed by Duncan Jones, who directed the sci-fi hit Moon.

Assassin's Creed
December 21

Ubisoft announced in February it wouldn't be releasing a new entry in the Assassin's Creed series in 2016, saying the team would be taking the year off to reexamine the franchise. Thankfully for fans, they won't have to go cold turkey. Michael Fassbender pulls double duty as Callum Lynch and his Assassin ancestor, Aguilar, who plied his trade in 15th century Spain. Jeremy Irons plays Abstergo Industries CEO Alan Rikkin. It'll be interesting to see how successfully the film can juggle the often confusing interplay between multiple time periods and Abstergo – not to mention the First Civilization's role in the whole mess.

Resident Evil: The Final Chapter
January 27, 2017

Milla Jovovich reprises her role as Alice in the sixth film installment of the Resident Evil franchise. Ali Larter is back as Claire Redfield, and Shawn Roberts once again slips into the sunglasses of the sinister Albert Wesker. Director Paul W.S. Anderson has said that this will be the last entry in this iteration of the series, but we doubt we'll be seeing the last of this one. Capcom has a longstanding habit of rebooting and remaking games in the survival-horror pioneer, and it only stands to reason that the movies will follow suit.

Bootcamp For The Next Generation

In just a few short years, Girls Make Games has grown from a single 15-day camp in Mountain View, Calif., to an organization that helps teach girls how to design and create their own video games in more than 18 cities worldwide. We spoke with founder Laila Shabir about how the camps sprung out of Learn District (her indie studio), the benefits of tailoring programs for a group that's often overlooked in the games industry, the importance of education, and more.

You grew up playing games as a kid. Was that something that you kept doing as you grew older?
Games were a completely separate part of my life. Because I came from a Middle Eastern traditional culture, when you go to school, school's a very serious place. I think that's one of the things that Learn District is trying to change. It doesn't have to be a serious place. Learning is actually fun, inherently, which is why we enjoy learning so much when it's in game form. Growing up, as I got older, the pressure is greater. You go to school, your teachers are always talking about tests and homework, and that's all you have time for. We basically didn't talk about anything hobby-related at school, aside from homework, debate club, or writing club. It's not like the U.S.; you're not allowed to bring your 3DSs or phones.

How did you get involved with the games industry?
I was trained in economics, and I worked in banking for a year on Wall Street after I graduated. Then I was like, "What do I want to do? I want to go teach." Education was a really important part of my life. I went to Washington, D.C., to work at a think tank called the Brookings Institution. They do a lot of policy research and

economic research. It's a great place to get started if you want to get a PhD. That's where I was when I met my husband, who was at the time a semi-professional Halo player. That was a big clash of two different worlds.

He worked in banking, but he still had the thing where he really wanted to be in games. "Why games? It seems like such a waste of time. You're an adult." He convinced me of the power of video games, and I think the more we talked about it, the more I realized we could combine both of our passions. His was making games, and mine was teaching. After we got married, we launched our indie game studio, Learn District, which is the parent company behind Girls Make Games.

Now I'm in the games industry, and I know nothing about the industry. So I go to my first PAX, my first GDC, the IndieCade, and all I see is boys. I'm trying to recruit for my team, and it ends up being myself and six boys. Talking to these boys, I ask, "Where are the girls, and why aren't they applying to our jobs?" Their response was, "I don't think girls want to do this, girls don't play many games." I think there was something in the back of my mind that went, "I don't know, there seems to be something more than just, 'Girls don't want to make games.'"

Our first summer, 2014, we started as an experiment; we wanted to see how girls played games. It was important for us, because we were making educational content, to see anyway how both genders played. We had done a lot of playtesters who were boys, but not enough girls. So we launched this three-week summer camp where we would teach them and also introduce them to things that we're making. Word got out – I think Twitter was pretty much the wildfire – I think Tim Schafer tweeted about it a few times, and before we knew it instead of saying it was a summer camp, Girls Make Games was more of an organization that wants to teach girls. It became a lot bigger than we'd intended, and now it's pretty much all that I do full time.

How did Girls Make Games first start? I'd imagine that starting a camp from scratch isn't exactly easy.

The Bay Area is a place where anything can happen, and at lightning speed. We literally just walked up to the Computer History Museum and pitched the idea, and they said, "Yeah, we'd love to have you here." That was fantastic, finding a space in the heart of Silicon Valley. That's where a lot of the big companies have their meetings, and Google pretty much runs all of their events there. It's walking distance from Facebook, Google – all of that stuff. Once we had space, what do we do? We just go around and tell people about it.

We're not certified teachers or anything, but here's a camp where game developers will come and teach your kids how to make games. That, itself, was exciting to a lot of people. We heard people saying things like, "My daughter feels like she has to be someone else at school, because she loves games and none of her peers do. So she comes home and she's a completely different person, she plays with her brothers." We had a lot of those girls, who didn't have a place to express themselves and had now found a community.

What do girls learn at your camps?

There are definitely two aspects to it. There's one that's definitely very easy to evaluate, which is technical. They learn how to program. If they don't have any background at all, they'll definitely understand game logic and programming logic, because we use a tool called Stencil, which is very visual. There's a second layer, which is if you know block coding, we want to introduce you to scripting, so we introduce them to Unity. Then it gets really hardcore – C# and learning how programming works. They gain an appreciation for all the different parts that go into game making, which include writing, producing, art, music – and that's one of the reasons that girls love the camp so much, is because a lot of girls like story writing. A lot of girls love art. Even though programming isn't something that drew them to camp – and I can say that most girls don't come in saying, "Oh my god, I can't wait to learn programming" – they come in because "I love games." If you can make the art and the writing and the storytelling accessible and then kind of hook them in, and then feed them the broccoli of C#, it's a lot easier.

The second thing they learn is a sense of community and a sense of social engagement. I think a lot of kids these days are just glued to screens too long. Getting out there and meeting kids with the same interests not only helps them feel validated in their own interests and hobbies, but it also boosts their confidence. I hear from parents who say, "My daughter has blossomed. She found her people at GMG." It's a very unique experience for a subgroup of girls that love games.

Why are you focusing on girls in particular?

We hear feedback from girls who say, "I've been to a camp where we made games, but it was just me and all boys." And then the follow-up question of, "Would you go back there or to Girls Make Games?" The response is always, "Girls Make Games." There's something about being a 10-year-old girl and being teased by a boy that kind of gets them to shut down completely. We've had co-ed camps before, Learn District has had co-ed workshops, but that was before Girls Make Games existed. In those co-ed workshops, you would see the boys group up on one side and the girls group up on the other side, so there was already self-segregation in a way. The girls tended to not speak up as much in class or ask questions, because they didn't want to be embarrassed, where in an all-girls camp all hell breaks loose. [laughs] They're not shy anymore.

Do you have any thoughts on why women don't seem to be entering the games industry in the same numbers as men?

There are a lot of things that keep them from entering. First, it's such a small niche. When people think about video games, it looks like a hobby – especially to parents. One of the things we do at our camp on the first day, we call it orientation in the morning, and it's orientation for the girls and for parents. Then toward the end we talk about careers and how it's a thing that they can do. But it begins at home. If a parent goes out and buys an Xbox for their son and a doll for their daughter, then that's the message that's being sent. If it's not available, after some time you stop trying. The other thing, which is what happened to me, is that you start to get too serious at a very young age. It's just how we are. I think girls tend to be very perceptive of their environment, so their peers, their parents, all the societal pressures, all those sort of things. I was thinking about getting a job and supporting my family at 12 or 13. Not a lot of boys do that, because they're still in a play mode in life. They'll go out and play soccer and socialize and do their thing, but girls tend to be very sensitive in that area. That will, in a way, decide what choices you make.

If you see your parents are doctors and engineers, that shapes who you might want to be. I think getting girls into computer science, that's hard, and then into games – that's like a further funnel. And also, I think careers in games and tech haven't figured out how to retain women, because we have different lifestyles once we have kids and get married and all that.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1990s
Growing up in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, Shabir is drawn to Atari consoles and their pixel art, playing games when her brother is out playing soccer. She also tutors neighborhood kids in an outdoor home classroom.

2000
Shabir is introduced to the Ivy Leagues after, of all places, reading John Grisham novels. Going to college becomes an obsession, and she finds a mentor online who helps guide her through the admissions process.

2010
After studying economics and graduating from MIT, Shabir works at a Wall Street bank to pay off student loans.

2011
Laila takes a job at the Brookings Institute. She meets her future husband, a semi-pro Halo player, at a friend's wedding, and the pair decides to combine their passions for games and learning.

2013
Learn District, Shabir's indie studio, successfully raises funds for the SAT vocabulary game Penguemic on Kickstarter. During playtesting, the studio hits on the idea for the Girls Make Games camp in Mountain View, Calif.

2014
Girls Make Games is championed by industry luminaries including Kellee Santiago and Tim Schafer, with its 15-day camps eventually expanding to 18 cities worldwide.

opinion

The Awkward Teenage Years Of Mobile Gaming

By Nick Ahrens, Creative Producer at Hidden Variable Studios

To talk about the current status of the mobile-game industry is really to talk about the swaying winds of the modern technology marketplace. The last 25 years of tech development and advancement has created wave after wave of gold rushes resulting in new, explosive trends. It's easy to say the mobile industry is struggling right now, and for some people that may be true, but I think we're seeing an industry that went through a major boom settle into its own skin.

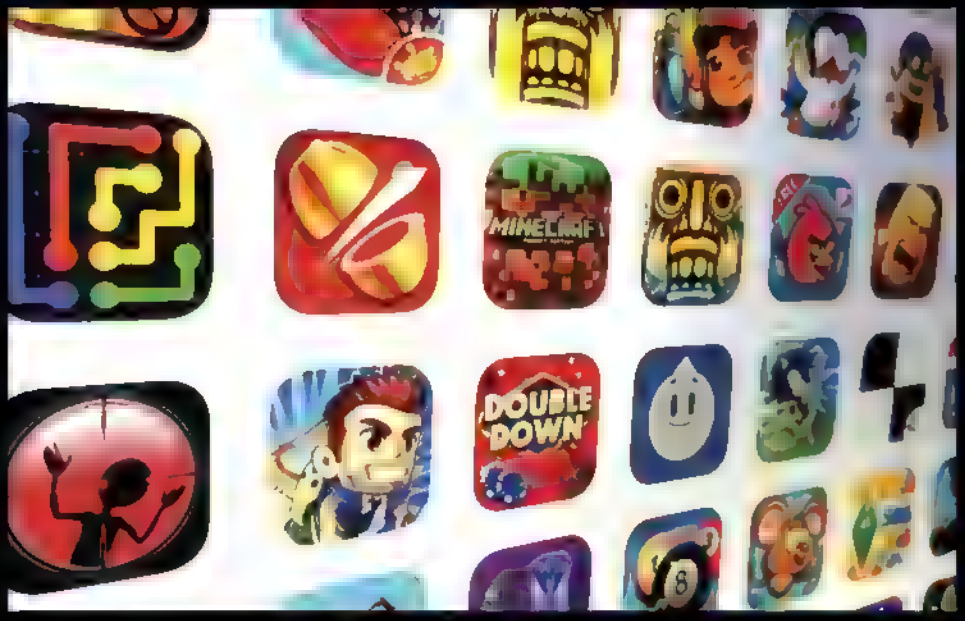
The current struggle for mobile development is similar to the difficulties seen in indie game development: small companies betting big that their first title will sustain them to the next. It's the dream of the garage rock band packed into a five-inch touchscreen.

The advent of the app stores (and their extremely low barriers for entry) opened up a large, seemingly easy-to-reach audience for developers, but it also created a "lost in the crowd" effect that can set talented developers adrift in the middle of a vast, noisy ocean of content.

App-store discovery has become an issue so daunting that developers either need to rely on selective app-store featuring or expensive user acquisition. And while word of mouth is still a powerful tool, it's hard to bet the farm on it. The only thing that's changing is the sheer number of apps that are being released, and it keeps rising. In the time between me writing this piece and the magazine being delivered to readers, more games will be submitted to the Apple App Store than have ever been released on all consoles ever. That's a lot.

This creates not only a cutthroat environment for competition, but also a staggering generation of game cloning. While developers have been using other games' ideas since the dawn of the industry, it's now commonplace for a mobile game of even minor notoriety to have dozens of games exactly like it pop up mere months after release.

Beyond the issues of discovery and oversaturation, new trends are creating hot ways for investors to get involved with the next big thing. Mobile games are no longer the new kids on the block (and hey, that's okay). As of this writing, virtual reality is currently seeing the same type of mad-dash investment mobile devices had over the last (nearly) 10 years. Wearables enjoyed a similar-yet-smaller gold rush a few years ago as well. Looking at the history of technology, this trend isn't changing anytime soon. Innovations lead to new consumer sectors in technology; the push for machine learning that blends with everyday use or the "internet of everything" seems to reinforce that new waves are on their way soon.



It would be too easy to view this as a Bermuda triangle of sharks for mobile games, just swallowing up devs left and right until the movie's over. Just a few years ago, if you were to ask the top indie developers if they wanted their game published by a large company, they'd probably cast that notion off as anathema to their reasons for being independent. But these days, publishers and indies are figuring out a new dance of partnership models that differ from the console days of old, but still result in a similar outcome: bringing games to market with the support to give them a fighting chance. When done right, this is good for the developers and the customers who play their games.

While there's definitely a great, passion-driven core of indie mobile developers that keep charging forward solo, it's becoming a harder and harder model to sustain completely alone. It's pretty common for a new developer to get just enough funding to release their first project on the app store, and that's it. This means leaving out things that help raise awareness, like marketing and public relations. Instead, the hope is to get the attention of platforms like Apple and Google to secure a featured slot in the app stores. However, these limited spots are only occupied by a few of the thousands of apps and games in the queue to be sold.

Publishing partners lack actual content creation, but have the infrastructure and capital for exposure. Working with a partner isn't necessarily scary, because the terms have changed and become more small-business-friendly. And a big part of that is due to the "anyone can submit" nature of the app stores. You don't need to sign over the IP to release a game anymore; many partners and publishers are more willing to negotiate, especially in the mobile space – a trend I hope to see continue.

While it's hard to see the days of large-scale development and publishing going away anytime soon, hopefully with this new, more adult mobile (and really indie) industry, we're going to start seeing a new rise of small- to medium-sized developers that we once thought were going extinct just a few years ago. ◆

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer.

2016

June

02.1 New Releases
- Carmageddon: Max Damage *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Daydreamer: Awakened Edition *(Xbox One)*

03.2 2D Con 2016
If you're traveling to Minnesota's Mall of America for a shopping vacation, 2D Con kicks off today at the nearby Doubletree Hotel. Running for three days, 2D Con is a charitable convention that features gaming tournaments, live music, cosplay, vendors, and an auction. You may even see Game Informer editors roaming the halls.

03.3 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows
Hollywood's assault on '80s cartoons continues today with the theatrical release of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows*. The turtles still look silly, but we like what we're seeing of Rocksteady, Bebop, and Krang.

04.1 Star Wars: Han Solo
Did you know Han Solo always wanted to become a starship racer? In a new five-issue limited series from Marvel, Han Solo gets the chance to live that dream, but not without serving his duty to the Rebellion. He's working undercover as a racer to rescue missing informants and spies. The first issue ships this month alongside a new *The Force Awakens* comic series adapted from the movie.

04.2 Rebirth
Just a few years removed from *New 52*, the DC Comics universe reboots again today. While some elements from the past carry forward, *Rebirth* is another attempt for DC to clean up its universe. Outside of *Detective Comics* and *Action Comics*, which continue with issues 934 and 957, all series are restarting at issue one. They also carry a lower $2.99 price point.

06 New Releases
- Edge of Nowhere (Rift)

07 New Releases
- Assetto Corsa *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Hearts of Iron *(PC)*
- Odin Sphere: Leifthrasir *(PS4, PS3, Vita)*
- Mirror's Edge Catalyst *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

10.1 New Releases
- A Game of Changes *(PC)*
- Kirby: Planet Robobot *(3DS)*

10.2 Warcraft
Video game movies are usually colossal disappointments, but we have a good feeling about *Warcraft*, which hits the silver screen today. The trailers have shown it will either be a fun movie to watch or a fun movie to mock, so it guarantees an enjoyable theater experience. Here's hoping director Duncan Jones can finally give us a video game movie that we want a sequel to.

12 E3 2016
With Electronic Arts and Activision leaving E3's show floor, one has to wonder what the future of video games' biggest trade show will be, but for 2016 we anticipate another typical year of console-focused excitement. Will Nintendo finally show off the NX? What surprises will Sony and Microsoft reveal? Head to Gameinformer.com for minute-to-minute show updates, beginning with EA's press conference on June 12.

17 Finding Dory
Finding Nemo didn't seem like a movie that would demand a sequel, but if we get more of Ellen DeGeneres and Albert Brooks getting into trouble, we're all in. The film opens in theaters today alongside *Central Intelligence*, a new comedy starring Aaron Paul, Kevin Hart, Amy Ryan, and Dwayne Johnson.

21 New Releases
- Deadlight: Director's Cut *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- Grand Kingdom *(PS4, Vita)*
- No Man's Sky *(PS4, PC)*
- Umbrella Corps *(PS4, PC)*

24.1 New Releases
- Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE *(Wii U)*

24.2 Independence Day: Resurgence
Two decades have passed since Earth beat the space snot out of alien invaders. Those aliens are back with bigger ships and what appears to be the same plot in *Independence Day: Resurgence*. Jeff Goldblum and Bill Pullman reprise their roles. What about Will Smith's Steven Hiller character? He was killed off on the ID 4 website in a short, one-paragraph story.

28 New Releases
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Bethesda Softworks

» DEVELOPER
Arkane Studios

» RELEASE
November 11

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

Dishonored 2 returns with double the trouble for those who threaten the throne at Dunwall Tower

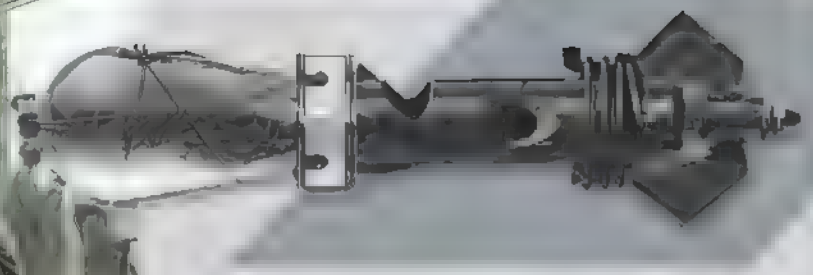
By Matt Bertz

When Arkane Studios unleashed Dishonored into the world in 2012, everything about its creation defied expectations. Conventional wisdom said if a publisher is debuting a new title in the summer, it should make the announcement at E3. Instead, Bethesda revealed Dishonored to the world a month after the yearly showcase on the cover of *Game Informer*. Conventional wisdom argued making a single-player focused game was madness in an age where multiplayer was taking over. But Dishonored shunned competitive and cooperative play altogether to focus on a simulation-driven, emergent fantasy of playing a supernatural assassin who, unconventionally, doesn't need to kill to complete his missions. Conventional wisdom also claimed releasing a new intellectual property late in the console cycle was a death sentence – how can you stand a chance when you're standing toe-to-toe with a field of well-seasoned sequels? Dishonored came out seven years after the debut of the Xbox 360 and more than stood its ground. It thrived.

The stealth-action hybrid debuted to near universal critical praise, earning a Metacritic rating of 91 on PC and in the high 80s on consoles. The game also defied Bethesda's sales expectations. A month after release, Bethesda VP of PR and marketing Pete Hines said, "We clearly have a new franchise."

Arkane teased its plans for Dishonored 2 with an impressive video at last year's Bethesda Showcase, revealing that the studio's impulse to give the middle finger to convention is alive and well. The helpless child and heir to the throne from the first game, Emily Kaldwin, is all grown up. After a coup drives her out of Dunwall, the Empress follows in the silent-but-deadly footsteps of her father, Corvo Attano, to reclaim her rightful place as Empire of the Isles' ruler.

Game Informer journeyed to the company headquarters in Lyon, France, to see Dishonored 2 in action for the first time and learn how Arkane's approach to game design has evolved for its unconventional sequel that asks players to shape the future of the Empire of the Isles. Do you paint the walls red with the blood of the usurpers, or break the circle of violence and find another path to peace? And who acts as your instrument of vengeance – Corvo or Emily?



15 YEARS LATER...

Moving away from Corvo Attano in only the second game of the series seems like a peculiar decision considering how beloved he is to Dishonored fans. His impressive skills, badass-looking mask, and the mystery surrounding his background and how he got close enough to Empress Jessamine Kaldwin to father the heir to the throne all makes for a compelling action hero. Striking gold twice on a hit character seems like a chance Arkane didn't have to take, but the studio had its reasons.

A few months after Dishonored's celebrated release, the creative leadership group at Arkane started thinking about directions it could take the series in the future. Creative directors Raphael Colantonio and Harvey Smith kept returning to one character in particular: Emily.

"We couldn't stop thinking about what happened to this 10-year-old girl that you were protecting in the first game, whose mind and actions were being altered by your play style," Smith says. "People thought she would be an annoying child character, but the way her drawings changed and her voice lines changed based on how people were playing resonated. When you come back from a murderous spree and she's drawing black crayon disturbed drawings, it changed the way people played; they started to consider the moral consequences of her actions."

Building off this feedback, the designers asked themselves what Emily would be like 15 years later. Apparently, she's much more dangerous than your typical empress.

"Part of our background fiction is that Corvo is a little paranoid about protecting his daughter," Smith says. "After the assassination of Jessamine Kaldwin during the rat plague, Corvo decides that Emily needs his training. He says, 'Someday people will come at you with knives, and I want you to be ready.' So Emily spends the next 15 years training on and off with Corvo. And Emily is a character who loves going out at night and running along the rooftops of Dunwall much more than she enjoys being an empress and listening about a trade dispute."

That training comes in handy when dissidents successfully pull off a coup d'état. Emily escapes the bloody fate of her mother, but loses her seat of power. After growing up in a place of privilege, she is now on the run and mingling with the very people her sweeping decisions have been affecting on a daily basis. Players can assume the role of Emily Kaldwin to exact her

GUARDS ARE MUCH MORE SAVVY IN DISHONORED 2, CAPABLE OF VAULTING AND CLIMBING TO TRACK DOWN CORVO OR EMILY

BLOODFLIES ARE HARMLESS IN SMALL NUMBERS BUT COME AT YOU IN LETHAL SWARMS WHEN YOU GET NEAR THE FLESHY NESTS THEY BURROW INTO CORPSES

THE DUST DISTRICT GETS ITS NAME FROM THE HAZY CLOUDS OF SILVER THAT ROLL OVER THE CITY FROM THE NEARBY MINE

revenge and reclaim the throne, or once again task Corvo with the same job. Either choice you make, at a high level the game plays out essentially the same.

When fans found out they could play Dishonored 2 from the perspective of Emily Kaldwin, they were overwhelmingly positive. "The response was stunning for us," Smith says.

With two playable characters, you might assume Arkane has plans for cooperative play. It does not, which is something that Smith says should be emphasized in all caps. "Our game is about observation, stealth, taking your time, and playing at your own pace," Smith says. "Co-op would destroy it. Maybe there is a way somebody could do it, but this is not that experience."

Given that Emily and Corvo each have unique weapon tuning, assassinations, supernatural abilities, and emotional reactions to the story that unfolds, Arkane is essentially making two unique ways to play through the game. Why undertake this expensive endeavor given the knowledge that a vast majority of players will probably only play through the game once?

"If you make all your decisions based on what you think is selling well, you end up with this kind of indistinct mess," Smith says. "Whereas if you go with what is in your heart as a gamer, that's kind of how we think. It doesn't make financial sense, but counterintuitively that's how you get rewarded financially. When [From Software] made Demon's Souls, it broke every rule that a triple-A publisher would tell you was smart thinking at that moment, and it launched this franchise and this team. We think similarly. There is a lot of our game that nobody sees. We're throwing away huge amounts of work from that perspective. But from our perspective, that's what makes it special – the fact that as you proceed through the game you constantly have this sense that it's much bigger than what you're doing."

Dishonored 2 begins and ends with missions in Dunwall, which has a much different atmosphere than it did in the first game. The Walls of Light and Tallboys are gone, and with the plague neutralized many abandoned parts of the city have been revitalized. But the majority of the game takes place in the southernmost region of the Empire of the Isles – the Serkonan city of Karnaca.

Creating Karnaca

Dishonored's emergent gameplay earned much of the praise when it released, but its painterly art style conceptualized by Victor Antonov and Sebastien Mitton also captured admiration from critics, developers, and fans alike. Now a creative consultant for Bethesda as a whole, Antonov is less involved with Dishonored, but Mitton is still leading the charge as art director and has grand ambitions.

"The art of Dishonored 2 is a knife in the neck of generic sequels," Mitton says.

To bring this vision to life, Mitton has enlisted the help of several talented European artists like Sergey Kolesov and Piotr Jablonski. The art team's process is comprehensive, involving sketching, painting, sculpture, photography, and eventually culminating in animation.

Designing a new setting for Dishonored 2 doesn't just start with dropping down buildings and citizens into a blank canvas. The artists first think anthropologically and politically, asking questions like who the first settlers were, which foreign powers took up residency in the region, and how the various tides of culture have left an imprint on the city over the course of several decades.

With the fictional history outlined, the team painstakingly designs everything from the furniture and architecture to fashion stylings of the multicultural Karnacan populace. The inspiration the team draws from during this process is not from other video games, but history itself and the work of master artists hanging in museums across the globe. "For us, art is not graphics," Mitton says. "Too many people judge the visuals of a game focusing only on polygon count, shaders, and technology... If your design is weak, you will fail, and your graphics won't save anything."

That being said, Arkane has also increased its capacity for generating better graphics. Unsatisfied with the dated rendering tech used to make Dishonored, the studio invested in a new technology base dubbed the Void Engine. Using id Tech as a foundation, the engineers designed a new platform that can handle the unique visual style of Dishonored, which rests somewhere between realistic lighting and an impressionistic world, while at the same time servicing the unique needs of a game that lives and dies on player agency and emergent experiences.

The resulting work is unique and impressive. In contrast to the heavily industrial, U.K.-inspired Dunwall, Karnaca calls to mind tropical islands and sunny Southern European cities. A dense forest and sharp ridges cover the majority of the island, and the city runs along the crescent shaped shoreline.

Though the city largely feels like a real place, fantastical elements also color the setting. A monolithic mountain looms over Karnaca. The giant peak is cleft in two, with the gap funneling wind toward the coastal city. The Karnacans have harnessed these gales to power the city, funneling the wind through the use of long, stilted pipes that rise above the city buildings. Touches like this and the Clockwork Soldiers seen in the E3 demo give the city just enough unfamiliarity to make it feel unique.

THE POWER OF A KALDWIN

Our first glimpse at Dishonored 2 picks up somewhere during the first third of the game. It begins in typical Dishonored fashion, with a boat rowing up to an inconspicuous dock in Karnaca. The face sitting across from Emily is familiar – the natural philosopher Anton Sokolov, who helped Piero Joplin discover the cure for the rat plague. The years have thinned his hair and whitened his beard, but he's still imparting wisdom to the Empress.

This region of the city is known as the Dust District, given its name because of the hazy plumes of silver dust that nearby mines kick across the area. The power-mad Duke of Serkonos is currently driving production at twice the normal capacity to fund a war with the northern islands of Tyvia and Morley, which has had dire consequences for this blue-collar part of the city formerly known as Batista. Sokolov says the dust has driven off most of its inhabitants. Emily quips about the duke not caring whose lives he ruins as long as he sips from silver cups, to which Sokolov replies, "And what are the cups in Dunwall Tower made from, Empress?"

Emily is here to find the office of Aramis Stilton, a former prince of industry in Karnaca. Sokolov tells Emily to meet up with a compatriot named Meagan Foster to figure out a way to gain entrance and perhaps find some useful information to use against the duke.

Graffiti lines the nearby walls after Emily disembarks, proclaiming "the crownkiller is watching." Perhaps Emily is assumed dead by some? Moving out of the dock area, Emily turns a corner and gets a beautiful glimpse of the crescent-island city below. The view of the bay is breathtaking, but we're not heading toward the city center below just yet. Emily continues cautiously to her left, being careful to avoid the glances of the Grand Serkonan Guards stationed nearby. The guards gripe about losing too many good men to a gang called the Howlers and the Abbey of the Everyman, who are having a territorial dispute in the cordoned-off district.

Massive, wooden windbreaks line the facades of large buildings to protect them from the forceful gales barreling down on the district. They can also be used by nimble climbers to reach high vertical spaces. Emily skirts the environment and shows off her Far Reach power to quickly scale a nearby building. Arkane says verticality is a much larger factor in Dishonored 2, and like Corvo's Blink, Far Reach is Emily's tool for quickly moving around the environment. Unlike Blink, however, it is not a teleportation power; Emily physically moves to the new location, which means enemies can spot her.

Emily vaults to the top of a fan directly overlooking the patrol below and jumps to perform a drop assassination, but this one has a twist. Instead of lodging a sword in the enemy's neck, Emily merely incapacitates the target, using his body to soften her landing.

The other guards take notice, and in this short encounter we see several new mechanics at play. Guards are now smart enough to vault and scale obstacles, ensuring they can bring the attack to the player. It doesn't help this group, however, because after a quick slide assassination, some explosive crossbow shots, and a Far Reach upgrade skill that allows Emily to grab a

Stealth Your Way

One of the challenging things about designing a game around player agency and emergent gameplay is that not everyone walks away with the same impression of difficulty. While some found Dishonored to be very hard or just right, a small percentage of hardcore fans who mastered Corvo's various powers found the game to be exceptionally easy. For Dishonored 2, Arkane Studios is introducing an array of sliders to let players determine how hard or easy they want the game to be. For instance, players can tweak how visible they are when crouching behind cover and peeking around the corner. "It might still change because we're in pre-beta, but currently we're still constantly making the base game slightly more challenging just because you have more tools," says lead designer Dinga Bakaba.

Dishonored 2 also introduces quick saves and quick loads to all versions of the game, alongside a checkpoint system so less mindful players don't lose long segments of progress.

Speaking of player-governed experiences, one of the biggest fan requests in the Dishonored forums is mods. When we ask creative director Harvey Smith about whether or not Arkane has plans to support user creation, he says, "We can't talk about our plans in that area just yet."

nearby canister of whale oil and whip it at an enemy for a quick kill (think Daud's Pull power from The Knife of Dunwall DLC), she's already on her way to the rendezvous point with Foster.

From the safety of a building, Foster breaks down the lay of the land. With the Howlers and Abbey at war, players have several options at their disposal. You could kill the Howler leader and bring his body to the Vice Overseer to gain entrance to Stilton's office, do vice versa, kill them both and muscle your way in, find an off-the-beaten-path, non-lethal solution, or try to crack the code of the ridiculously hard-to-solve Jindosh lock on the front door (which Arkane says has 100 million possible configurations). The choice rests with the player.

Leaving the building, Emily enters a neutral zone inhabited by Karnacan civilians, one of several of these types of spaces coming to Dishonored 2 where players can get a better sense of the city. By interacting with the denizens, the player may learn more about the city and perhaps discover that secret passage into Stilton's office. Instead, Emily chooses the bolder measure and ventures into the region guarded by the Abbey.

PLAYERS CAN NOW PERFORM DROP ATTACKS NONLETHALLY

STAGGERING AN ENEMY GIVES YOU AN OPPORTUNITY TO PUT THEM IN A CHOKE HOLD

Moving cautiously, Emily comes across an Abbey executioner standing before a blindfolded man who is reading off the man's litany of crimes before sentencing him to death. She interrupts the proceedings by using Far Reach to yank the executioner to her – another high-level upgrade to the base power.

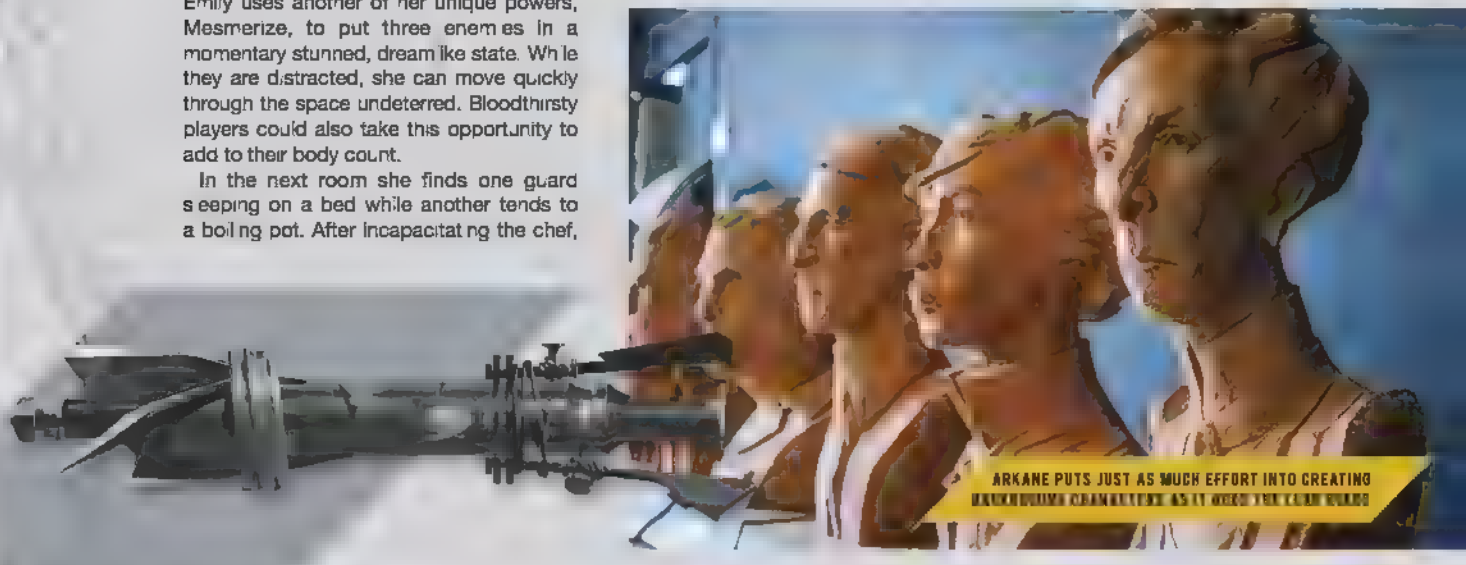
The ensuing fight against the nearby Abbey guards showcases another useful combat enhancement. After staggering an enemy, you can put them in a choke hold. From here you can use them as a shield, assassinate them, or incapacitate them for non-lethal players. This recurring mention of new non-lethal options is no accident; Arkane heard the criticisms about the underdeveloped stealth options in the original game, and is taking measures to ensure it offers just as much variety as the combat-centric experience. This applies both to regular combat and the supernatural powers that both Corvo and Emily wield.

Moving into the Vice Overseer's building, Emily uses another of her unique powers, Mesmerize, to put three enemies in a momentary stunned, dreamlike state. While they are distracted, she can move quickly through the space undeterred. Bloodthirsty players could also take this opportunity to add to their body count.

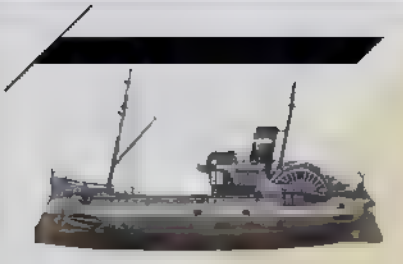
In the next room she finds one guard sleeping on a bed while another tends to a boiling pot. After incapacitating the chef, she places him on a bunk next to the other dozing soldier. No one will be the wiser about his condition.

Emily moves up the stairs and locates Vice Overseer Byrne in an office with four other Abbey guards. Byrne is giving a presentation with a projector, talking about his bigger plans for the Abbey, which run against the grain of his relationship with the Duke of Serkonos.

This is the perfect scenario to showcase another of Emily's extraordinary powers: Domino. This upgraded ability allows her to link up to four people together. While sharing this supernatural bond, whatever happens to one character happens to the rest of them. In this instance, Emily links the four guards together, creates a distraction to lead one away from the rest, and places a stun mine that goes off when he gets near enough. The result? Four incapacitated enemies lying on the ground.



ARKANE PUTS JUST AS MUCH EFFORT INTO CREATING [illegible] AS IT DOES THE COMBAT



A Dreadful Home Away From Home

After each mission in Dishonored, Corvo returned to the Hound Pits Pub The sequel has a similar mechanic, but instead of going to a mainland hub, either Emily or Corvo take up residency in a smuggler's freighter known as the *Dreadful Wale*

This rickety 1850s style vessel may be a far cry from the opulence of Dunwall Tower, but it serves its purpose. Here players can interact with ship captain Meagan Foster, Anton Sokolov, or other characters who make occasional appearances. Players can also upgrade their quarters based on what they've done and found in the world.

"I think Domino is one of the most open-ended powers," says lead designer Dinga Bakaba. "It's also a QA nightmare, as you can imagine." This can be a particularly intriguing power to combine with others. For instance, you could summon another Emily using the Doppelganger power, Domino three high-end enemies to her, and assassinate the doppelganger to clear the room of heavies.

Taking out the guards all at once gives Emily the window she needs to move on to the Vice Overseer, and she uses the predatory Shadow Walk ability to move in close for the kill. This skill, first seen in the E3 trailer, lets Emily slink in the shadows and squeeze into tight spaces. Making a lethal strike cancels the power, but this can be upgraded so you can chain more kills together.

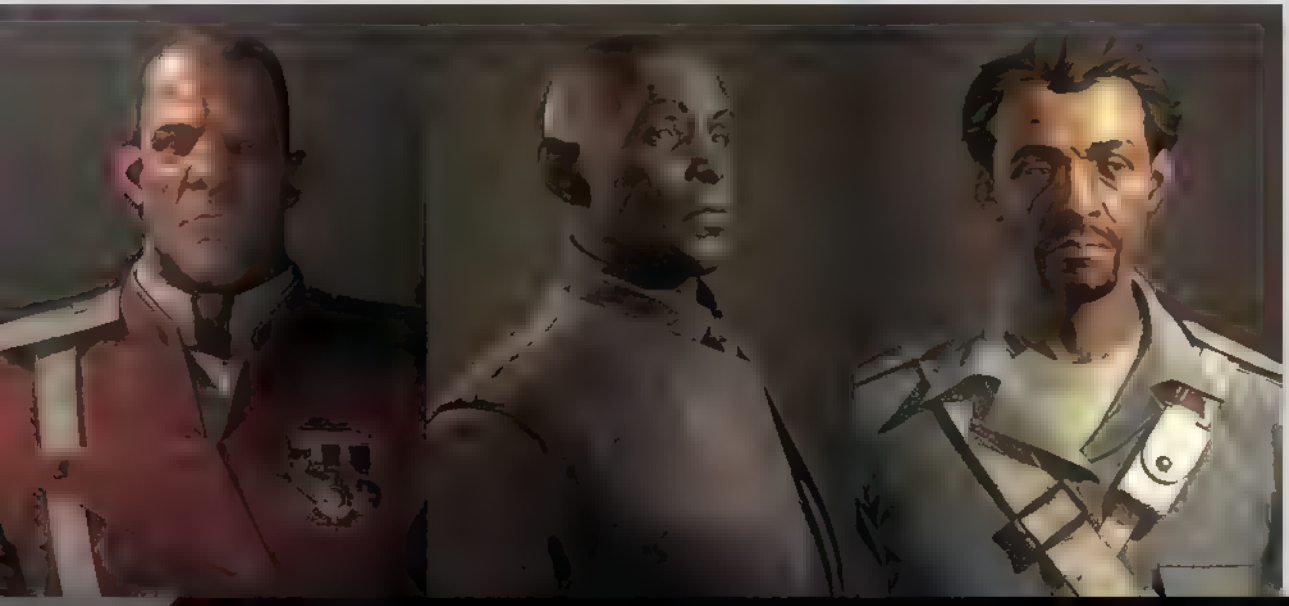
With the fatal blow struck, Emily must deliver the body to the Howler leader, Paolo. While navigating to Howler territory, a dynamic windstorm suddenly comes out of nowhere. These storms rage with a persistent, horn-like sound echoing through the buildings and heavy clouds of silver dust lowering visibility. Since enemies have diminished hearing and vision, players can gain the upper hand by using Dark Vision to stalk the foes or simply navigate quickly through a patrolled space as Emily does here.

Once Emily reaches the Howler region of the city, she can rest easy and walk down the street without fear of reprisal. This is only because she is carrying the Vice Overseer on her shoulder; should she drop him off somewhere, all the Howlers would view her as a threat and attack.

Entering the Crone's Hand Saloon that serves as the Howler base, Emily drops the body of the Vice Overseer on the bar in front of Paolo, who takes a swig of booze in appreciation for the gift he has received. He says he has been trying to bring down Byrne for months, and that a lot more is at stake in this conflict than just territory. Paolo muses he plans to send the body to Dunwall and explain things to the High Overseer and the Empress herself. Emily says if the Howlers do come into power, she hopes Paolo will conduct himself better than the duke has. He says she can count on it, hinting at the reformation possibilities at the disposal of players as they reclaim Emily's rule.

The demo concludes with Emily going upstairs to Paolo's office and coming across an Outsider Shrine. As she picks up the rune, she is transported into the Void and comes face to face with the Outsider.

"We've revamped the Void," Smith says. "It's much more impressive now and more dynamic. And we've updated the Outsider – we give you more insight into his history."



AN UNINTENDED HOMECOMING

Should players choose to tap Corvo for this revenge mission instead of Emily, the grizzled Lord Protector returns to the city of his birth. The homecoming is fitting considering players are also returning to the familiar array of supernatural powers from the first game. In a second playthrough of the same mission from Corvo's perspective, we see firsthand how his powers have expanded and evolved.

We also immediately notice one other big change to the stealth maestro: He now has a voice.

"One of the things people said about the first game was because Corvo was a silent protagonist, he felt a little cold and you never were sure how he felt about things emotionally," Smith says. "Somebody would say something and he would just be flat. We really embraced that piece of fan feedback, that they wanted more emotional engagement."

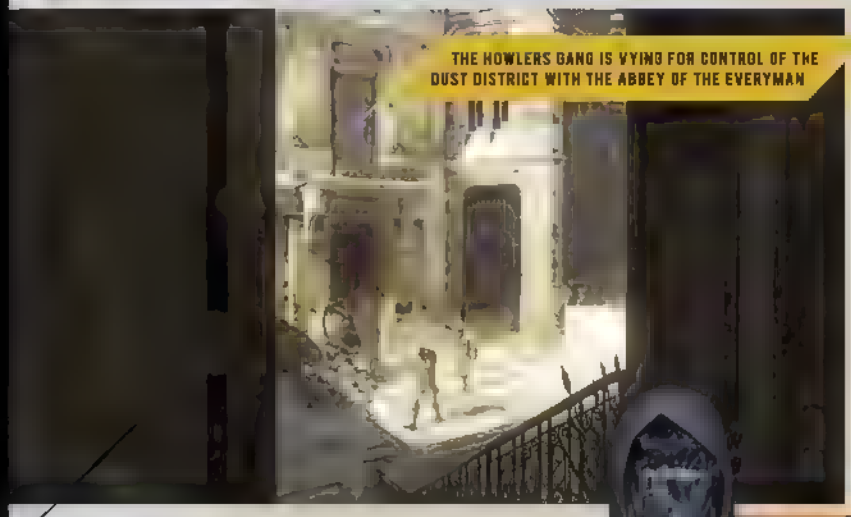
The voice behind the grizzled assassin should sound familiar to fans of stealth games considering Arkane landed Stephen Russell, the actor who voiced Garrett in the original Thief.

"Raf and I talked about how cool it would be to work with Stephen Russell because we're big Thief fans," Smith says. "Waiting until Dishonored 2, which takes place 15 years later, it means that Stephen Russell is even more appropriate in a way because he has that gravelly action-hero voice but with more thought behind it. You can feel his age in the voice; you can feel he's very seasoned as Corvo."

Arkane uses Corvo's playthrough to demonstrate more of the myriad paths players can take through the Dust District. Like the levels in the original game, observant players can find new avenues to their objectives. No paths are arbitrarily locked to Corvo or Emily; each can reach any area of a level.

Corvo ventures into a building infested with bloodflies, a parasitic insect that is harmless in small numbers but comes at you in lethal swarms when you get near the fleshy nests they burrow into corpses. A human nest keeper is tending to the various nests in the area, and Corvo remarks he's never seen the bloodflies this bad. They react to noise, movement, and speed, so moving cautiously is advised.

Corvo has other plans, sicking two swarms of rats on the nest keeper (one of the expanded uses of Devouring Swarm) and then using Bend Time to advance time while the rat swarm is on the nest keeper to do him in.

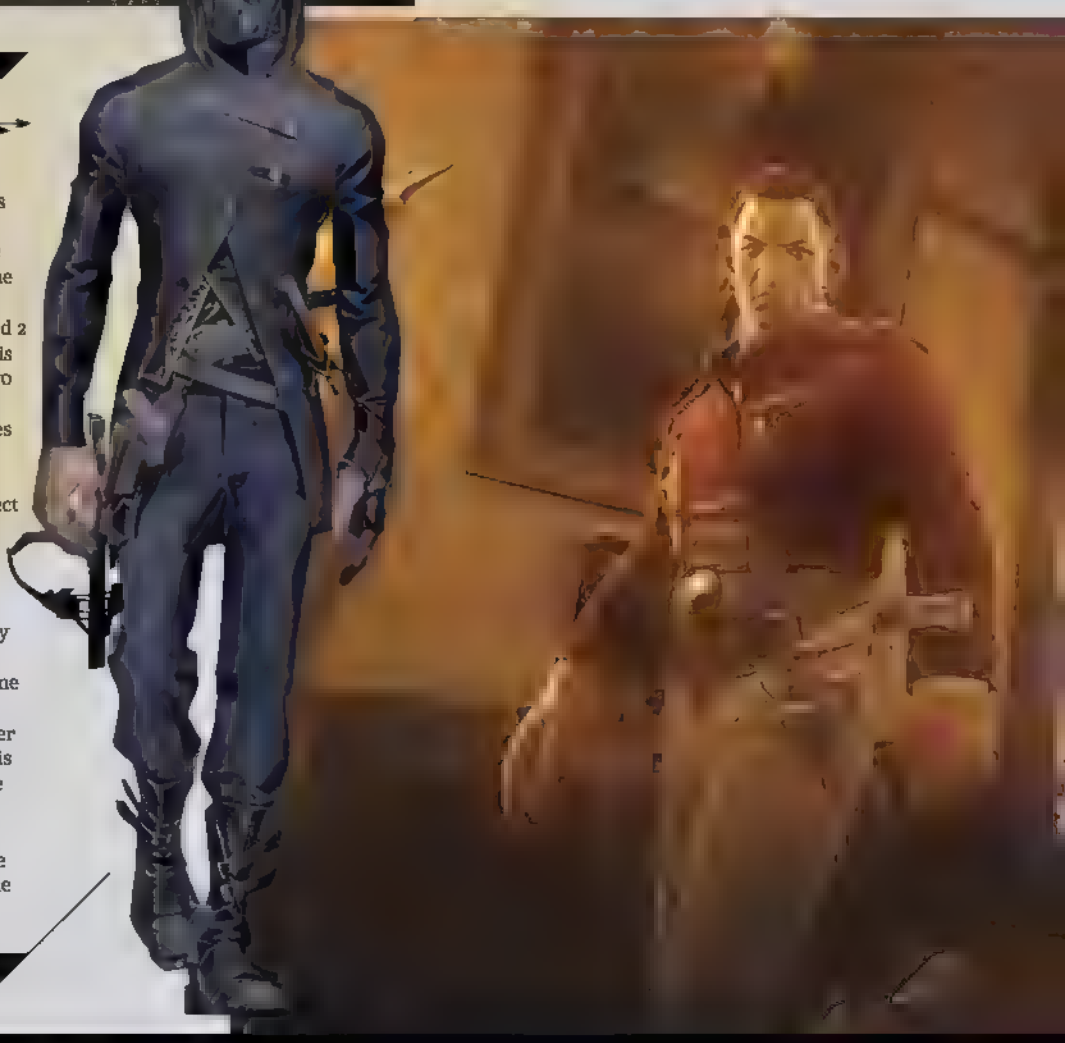


THE HOWLERS GANG IS VYING FOR CONTROL OF THE DUST DISTRICT WITH THE ABBEY OF THE EVERYMAN

The Assassins' Tools

Corvo didn't need a vast array of weaponry to exact his revenge on Jessamine's killers in Dishonored. Combined with his supernatural powers granted by The Outsider, all he needed to get the job done was a pistol, sword, and crossbow. This same basic loadout returns in Dishonored 2 for both characters, but Arkane Studios is embracing differentiation between Corvo and Emily.

While each wields the same three types of weapons, each looks different. Given that Emily is an Empress, her weapons show the craftsmanship you would expect for a person of her stature. Players can upgrade the gear by visiting the various black-market shops found throughout Karnaca. Spend enough capital improving your weapon, and you can eventually unlock one of the masterwork versions. Players must choose between an endgame upgrade for each. For instance, if Emily chooses the Red Siblings masterwork, her gun will shoot in bursts of three, which is enough firepower to take down multiple enemies at once if they are positioned close enough. Corvo and Emily both have unique masterwork varieties to the weapons that you cannot unlock with the other character.



"Bend Time level one just slowed things down, which was this cool kind of ballet of motion," Smith says. "Bend Time II is much more useful; it stops time altogether. But sometimes you wish that you could still advance it a little." That led to the team creating this upgrade to the power, which gives players the ability to fast-forward small chunks of time.

Then we see another evolution of a classic power in action as Corvo uses Possession in a new way, chaining possessions from rat to bloody fly to move around the room quickly. You can even upgrade the power to possess corpses this time around, which still have enough of a nervous system to allow you to peer from their perspective or just allude pursuit by playing dead.

These three enhancements are just a few of the ways Corvo's powers are changing in Dishonored 2. Arkane has devised a new approach to upgrades that gives players more options when upgrading both Corvo and Emily's abilities.

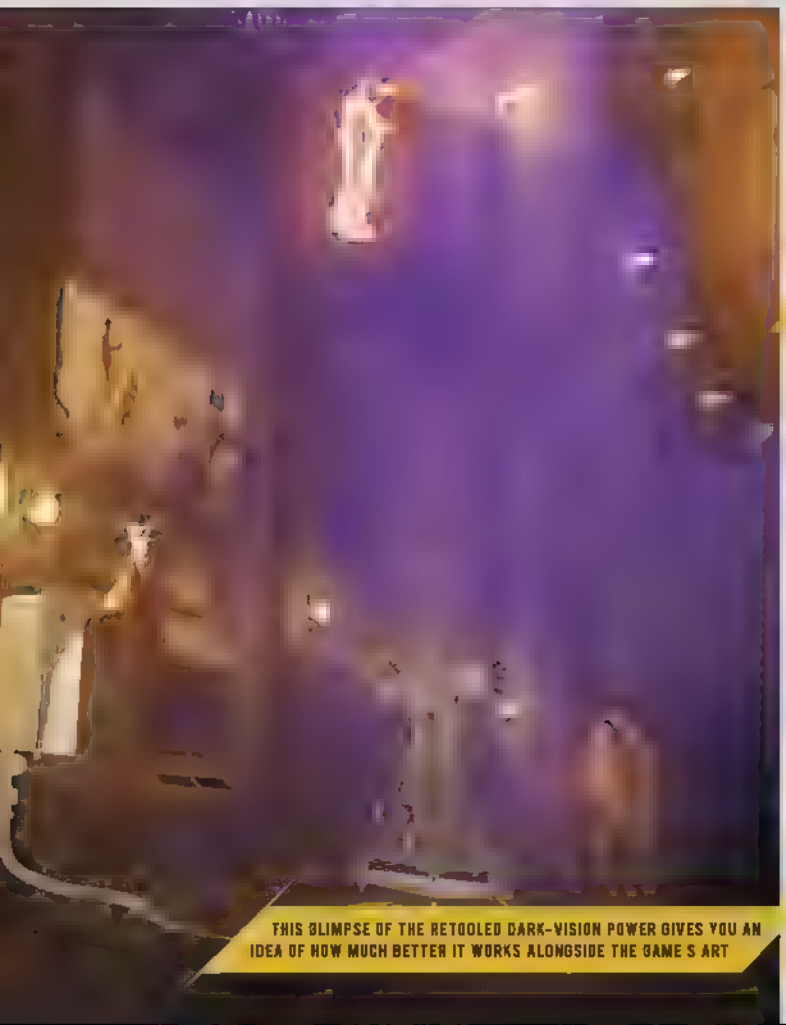
"In Dishonored, you had a power and an upgrade to the power," Smith says. "For what we were trying at the time, that was the right call I think. But after talking to thousands of Dishonored players over the past few years, one of the things we really wanted to do was branch out all of the powers into a tree. You can take the power and express in the direction of non-lethal or stealth."

Bakaba says every power-upgrade tree is different; some go in a straight line and then branch, and others fan out wide from the start.

Arkane also tweaked some powers to make them more effective right out of the gate. For example, players can use Blink to assassinate enemies through glass windows, and Dark Vision has been streamlined to be less invasive visually while still giving players the ability to identify threats. When you use Dark Vision it pulses three times, each time sending out a sphere of coverage. When you move, the next pulse happens from your new position, causing the spheres to overlap and give you a wider snapshot of the threats in your surroundings.

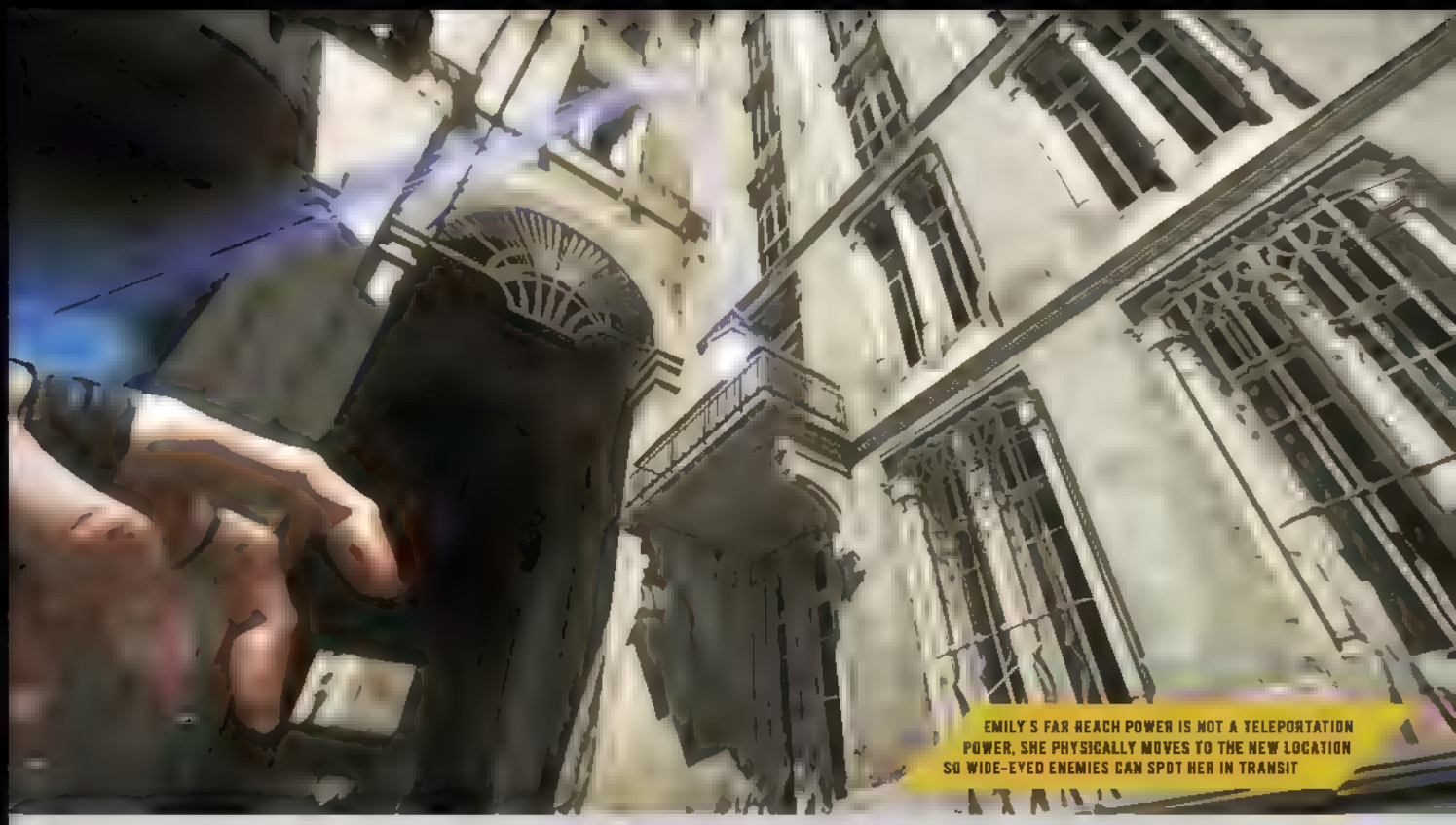
As the second demo concludes, we ask if players will gain new insight into Corvo's past considering we are in his hometown.

"There's a fine line here," Smith says. "With Dishonored, one of the things that people liked was that we didn't answer all of the questions. We left an air of mystery. Yet at the same time one of the things people asked for was the answer to those mysteries. It's kind of like the TV show *Lost* or *The X-Files*. The reason you are watching is because you don't know, and as soon as you're satisfied – the couple you're interested in kisses – then it's sort of over. We had to find a way to give people some of the answers they wanted, but ask new questions. So yes, you're going to find out more about Corvo."



THIS GLIMPSE OF THE RETOOLED DARK-VISION POWER GIVES YOU AN IDEA OF HOW MUCH BETTER IT WORKS ALONGSIDE THE GAME'S ART

THE ART FOUND IN KARNACA TELLS THE LEGENDS OF THE REGION



EMILY'S FAR REACH POWER IS NOT A TELEPORTATION POWER, SHE PHYSICALLY MOVES TO THE NEW LOCATION SO WIDE-EYED ENEMIES CAN SPOT HER IN TRANSIT

WIDENING THE SCOPE

Though it looks and feels quite different, the largely abandoned, derelict Dust District is reminiscent of the sparsely populated regions of plague-ravaged Dunwall. Arkane promises the game isn't a series of industrial ruins, but will take players to many different locations throughout Karnaca.

One of those places is the impossible looking Clockwork Mansion from the debut trailer. Arkane lives by the philosophy that if they show something in a trailer, players have to be able to do it in the game. We got a brief glimpse of this location, which due to its many different configurations looks like a designer and playtester's nightmare. "Several of our new missions are massive headaches," Smith jokes.

The rooms pull apart and reconfigure at the pull of a lever, giving players access to new parts of the mansion. Savvy players can also use Blink or Far Reach to access the inner mechanizations behind the mutating rooms.

Arkane is embracing challenges like this both with the level design and meta game. In Dishonored, some complained that the chaos system was too binary; if you killed a lot of people you got the "bad" ending, and if you were sparing in your bloodshed you got the "good" one. Smith hopes the new approach to calculating chaos will alleviate some of that frustration.

"We wanted to make sure that this time there was more variance in that," Smith says.

The Star-Studded Cast

With big names like Susan Sarandon *(Dead Man Walking)*, Lena Headey *(Game of Thrones)*, and John Slattery *(Mad Men)*, Dishonored set the bar high for its voice casting. The sequel introduces several new characters with voices you may recognize as well.

Luca Abele, Duke of Serkonos

VOICED BY Vincent D'Onofrio
BEST KNOWN FOR *Daredevil* (Wilson Fisk), *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (Det. Robert Goren)

Liam Byrne, Vice Overseer

VOICED BY Jamie Hector
BEST KNOWN FOR *The Wire* (Marlo Stanfield), *Heroes* (Benjamin "Knox" Washington)

Meagan Foster, Dreadful Wale Captain

VOICED BY Rosario Dawson
BEST KNOWN FOR *Kids* (Ruby), *Sin City* (Gail)

The Outsider

VOICED BY Robin Lord Taylor
BEST KNOWN FOR *Gotham* (Oswald Cobblepot)

Paolo, Howler Gang Leader

VOICED BY Pedro Pascal
BEST KNOWN FOR *Game of Thrones* (Oberyn Martell), *Narcos* (Javier Pena)

Corvo Attano

VOICED BY Stephen Russell
BEST KNOWN FOR Thief (Garrett), Fallout 4 (Nick Valentine)

Mortimer Ramsey, Dunwall City Watch

VOICED BY Sam Rockwell
BEST KNOWN FOR *Moon* (Sam Bell), *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (Chuck Barris)

Emily Kaldwin

VOICED BY Erica Luttrell
BEST KNOWN FOR *The Magic School Bus* (Keesha Franklin)

THE CLOCKWORK SOLDIERS FIRST SEEN IN THE E3 DEMO HAVE CHANGED FROM PORCELAIN TO WOOD

"We weight people differently now based on some things, and you can use the Heart in the game to assess more about the morality. Then they have a different weighting that influences chaos more or less."

Players also have more agency in framing the ending via their actions throughout the game, as evidenced by the possible outcomes over who rules the Dust District in the playthrough we witnessed. "There are many endgames this time, and many variations on those endgames, that drive the outcome of the game based on who you empower in your wake," Smith says. Coupled with the high and low variations of those, players can directly shape the trajectory of the Empire of the Isles.

TWO TRAJECTORIES, ONE GOAL

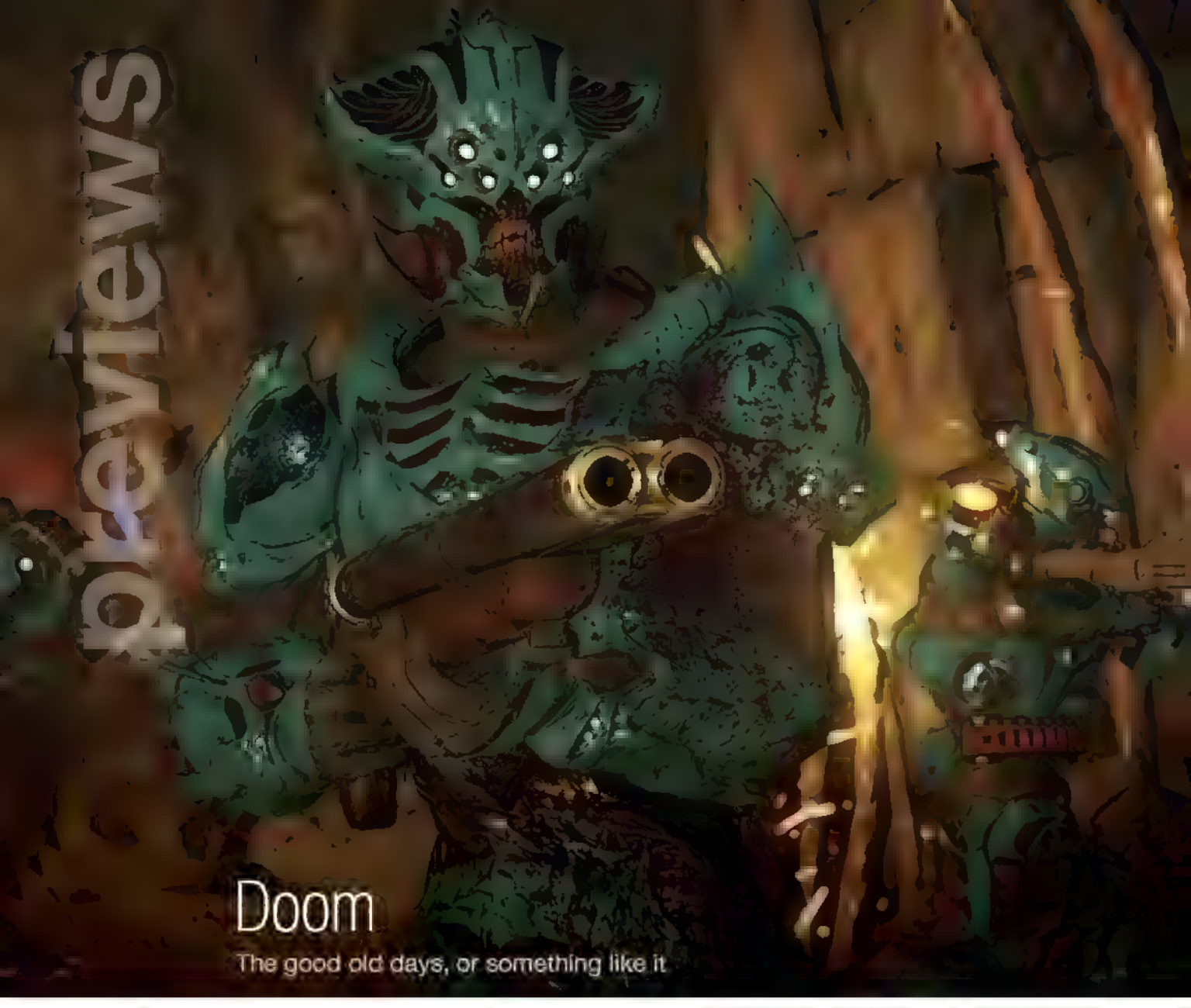
Combined with the prospect of going through the game with the perspective of the other playable character, the wider variety of outcomes could possibly encourage more gamers than the hardcore to do something unconventional – play through the story more than once. Fans of Emily and Corvo may feel they have no choice, as once you select your playable character, the other is left on the sidelines for the vast majority of the game.

Before we leave Arkane Studios, I ask the team who they think players will gravitate to on their first playthrough. They aren't convinced they know the answer.

"It's going to be super interesting to watch how people choose," Smith says. "Are more gamers going to choose Corvo because they know him from before and want to hear what his voice sounds like? Are they going to choose Emily because they are excited about the new character? Or is it going to break down by gender lines? I just don't know."

We'll all have to wait to find out until after Dishonored 2 comes out this November.

Learn more about the characters, locations, and art of Dishonored 2 during our month of exclusive online coverage. See it all at gameinformer.com/dishonored2



Doom

The good old days, or something like it

» **Platforms**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
id Software

» **Release**
May 13

As Doom's release date closes in on us, we got some hands-on time with the multiplayer component during a closed beta test. How does it stack up? The answer is surprisingly complicated.

Have no fear, fans of Quake and Unreal Tournament. The multiplayer component for Doom is comparable to those, with players moving quickly around the map and blasting each other to pieces. Combat is immensely enjoyable, largely thanks to the weapon handling and the fun of zipping around entire maps in seconds. It feels like playing a genuine old-school, first-person shooter instead of a competent homage to that era of games. People explode, sending rib cages and decapitated heads into the distance, while power-ups hover for you to grab – including a delightful one that lets you turn into a revenant, a powerful, missile-toting demon capable of ripping through hordes of players.

The two modes we played were team deathmatch and Warpath. While team deathmatch is self-explanatory, Warpath is basically a variant of king of the hill where two teams vie for a control point, except that point is constantly moving on a track that runs through the map. Players have to fight over this glowing train to take it over, and the team that's in control of it receives points with every passing second until the other team takes it back. Both modes are exciting and do a good job of serving as vessels for Doom's brand of chaotic violence.

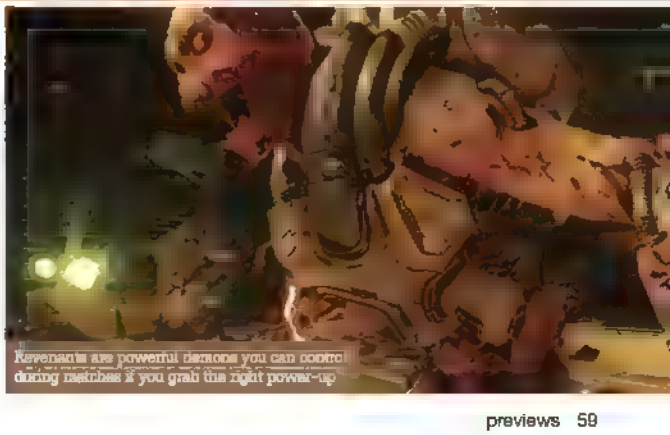
The two available maps, Heatwave and Infernal, are both classic arena-style maps filled with nooks, crannies, and loops for players to use to their advantage. Heatwave is an industrial-style level with pits of hot slag that will melt players who aren't careful with their jumps, while Infernal takes place in Hell and is filled with platforms hovering over an abyss. Of the two, I preferred my time with Heatwave because it offered more tactical positions to exploit against other players, but both maps are well designed and look gorgeous – in a gruesome, covered-in-entrails sort of way.

Basically, everything that's old-school about Doom works. When the game tries to shoehorn new, aggressively non-Doom elements into its multiplayer, then things get kind of annoying. For example, a variation of the loadout system from Call of Duty is here, forcing players to carry only two weapons during a match. Not only does this limit player freedom and downplay the possibility of enjoyable madness during matches, but in the end it seems like a tacked-on limitation designed to tap into industry trends, as do the multiplayer's hack consumables

As you level up (yes, a progression system like the one from Call of Duty is here, too) by playing matches and gaining experience, you unlock a plethora of items that run the gamut from being cosmetic tweaks to your armor to customizable loadouts to usable "hack modules" that let you briefly activate a special ability in a match. One hack highlights the last person who killed you, letting you see them through the map for a handful seconds, while others might let you find power-ups scattered across the map or see an opponent's health bar. All of the hack modules in the beta feel superficial and didn't really add anything to my experience other than something that cluttered my screen.

When I fiddled around with these systems the game felt like it was trying (and failing) to keep up with a new generation of shooters instead of being its own confident, exceptional experience. Thankfully, the progression system is only a small portion of the multiplayer experience, with just a big enough presence to annoy but not enough to rob Doom of its frenzied and gory charm. After all, this is a beta. Content might come further down the line in the full release that makes that progression system more enticing.

As it stands now, Doom's multiplayer is a good old-fashioned time that will likely delight fans of classic first-person shooters. Hopefully, the final version of the multiplayer will boldly embrace its roots. » **Javy Gwaltney**



Revenants are powerful creatures you can control during matches if you grab the right power-up.

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

New details on bonus story missions

PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Vita
3DS • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
TT Fusion

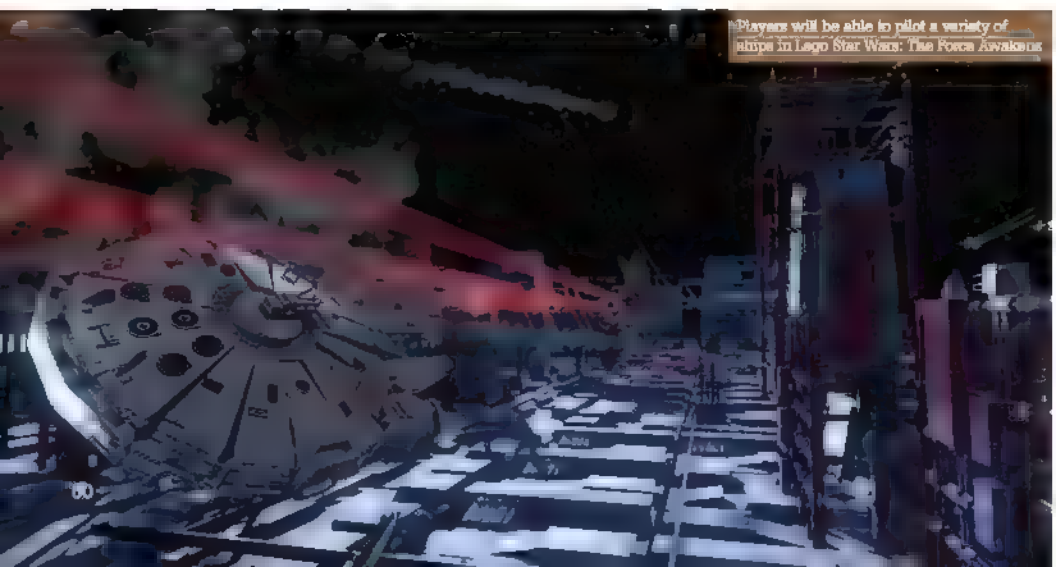
»
June 28

Star Wars fans are obsessive about the series, picking over the films and surrounding lore like a scavenging Jawa. *The Force Awakens* was accompanied with a blast of universe-expanding books, comics, and other material designed to build up the galaxy far, far away even further. You might expect sight gags and slapstick from TT Games' upcoming adaptation of the latest movie, but it's also home to new – and canonical – story content that fills in some gaps from before the events of *The Force Awakens*. We talked to game director Jamie Eden about the new entry, and what players can expect to learn in these special missions.

Between story missions, players can bump into special characters while exploring the various hub worlds. Give them enough gold bricks, earned by playing through missions and exploring, and they share what they were up to before the movie's opening crawl. According to Eden, these are full-length levels, with voice acting, flight sections, multi builds, and more.

"The film opens up with Lor San Tekka handing Poe this map to Luke Skywalker, and it's like, 'Where did he get that from? Who is Tekka?' People who have seen the film are asking who Tekka is, what his allegiance is," Eden says. The mission Tekka's Return may not provide all the answers, but it does fill in some of the mysterious figure's story. It's set in a different part of the desert planet Jakku than the ones shown in the film, tracking Tekka and his scavenger friend Athgar Heece. "There's this raging sandstorm in the area that they're passing through, and word has gone out that Tekka has this item of great importance. People don't know what it is, but there's an ambush that awaits him and he has to fight to get his way through this sandstorm and to his village safely."

Getting another glimpse of Jakku is fairly exciting, but the Rathtar Hunting mission introduces a whole new planet: Twon Ketee, home of the ferocious Rathtar. You might remember these tumbling, tentacled beasts from the introductory scenes with Han Solo and Chewbacca. This new mission depicts how Han and Chewie captured these ferocious predators, and also shows what happened to the rest of their hunting party. "We go to the planet where [Han] catches them



Players will be able to pilot a variety of ships in Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

The game features several new story missions that expand on The Force Awakens' lore

from, and we meet some of his crew," Eden says. "It's been really exciting for us to fill in some of the gaps and tell those backstories."

Eden says TT Fusion named and created Twon Ketee in collaboration with Lucasfilm. "We worked with them to say, 'If Rathtars were on a planet, what sort of a planet would they inhabit? What kind of atmosphere would it have?' We sort of saw swampy, gassy things. It's a really alien-looking planet." You saw what the Rathtars could do inside a ship, and they're just as deadly at home. "They've got cave systems, they're quite insectoid in the way they have these inside-of-cave-systems that they live in," Eden says. "Han and his crew explore those, and it's pretty tense. Without giving too much away, you obviously know that Han goes in and he used to have a bigger crew."

Sidon Ithano, also known as the Crimson Corsair, gets his own breakout section in Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens. You see the character and his crew briefly in Maz Kanata's castle, but we learn more about them in the game. "He's almost a swashbuckling, pirate-type guy," Eden says. "He's very arrogant and has a swagger about him. You see in the film Finn goes to leave Takadana with him, but we don't know much about these two characters, other than they'll trade work for travel to the outer rim. This lets us tell people more of their backstory, and also ties into some of the other new story content that we're able to tell, which is how the Resistance was able to get ahold of a First Order ship."

Ithano is a grappling, leaping scoundrel-type character, while his first mate, Quiggold, prefers to let his minigun do the talking. "Alongside them, you've got Pru Sweevant who's this small, impish character with a blue beard who's part of the mining crew," Eden says. "He's got a very strong affinity for explosives and thermal detonators."

The final mission we learned about, Resistance to the Rescue, is based on a Lego animated short that was released on Disney XD, *Poe to the Rescue*. It features Poe, C-3P0, and BB-8 on a mission to save Admiral Akbar from Captain Phasma's clutches. "It's good that we get to use that as a basis and expand on that and tell the parts that happened in between what we're seeing in that," Eden says. We learn more about how Poe knows where to find a ship they can use for an infiltration mission and how the Resistance discovers the location of

Wonder where the Rathtar came from? You'll be able to visit their home planet in the game

Kylo Ren's star destroyer, *The Finalizer*.

Putting new Star Wars story nuggets in a Lego game is an unconventional choice, but it's exciting that the upcoming game does more than recap a story that's now familiar. Even though these new chapters are bound to have a bit more silliness than the live-action versions, we're looking forward to getting a few more story details filled in. Now if they'd only tell us what Rey's last name is... » Jeff Cork

Mafia III

The headaches of mob management

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Hangar 13

» **Release**
October 7

With its new development team, 1968 Deep South setting, and interesting set-up that turns the traditional Mafia tale on its head, Mafia III is one of the most intriguing open-world games on the slate for 2016. Wronged by the Italian mob, a Vietnam veteran named Lincoln Clay vows to burn the criminal empire to the ground, rebuilding a new syndicate in the process. We recently got extended hands-on time with the game 8-10 hours into the quest for revenge.

This portion of the game covers a lot of the same ground as our November 2015 cover-story demo. Taking place in the downtown district of the faux New Orleans (which Hangar 13 can now confirm is called New Bordeaux), Lincoln's goal is to disrupt the rackets of mob money man Tony DeRazio and cut his operation out of Don Sal Marcano's criminal syndicate. To draw out DeRazio, he must inflict a certain amount of monetary damage to his operations, which are based around bribery and drawing out a city construction project to make it go way over budget. While knocking off enforcers and destroying construction supplies, we also saw some new facets of the game.

Lincoln's quest to destroy the Italian mob is being aided by John Donovan, a CIA agent he worked with in Vietnam who likes to paint outside the lines. Donovan can provide vital intel about Marcano's organization, but to do so he needs Lincoln to set up wiretapping operations throughout the district. Setting up the wiretap is as simple as locating a city phone box and jimmying the lock to place the bugging device on the switchboard. Once it's live, Lincoln's map is populated with the location of all nearby collectibles, enemy locations, and even the blueprints of an enemy hideout that reveals the multiple points of entry and strategic sniping spots.

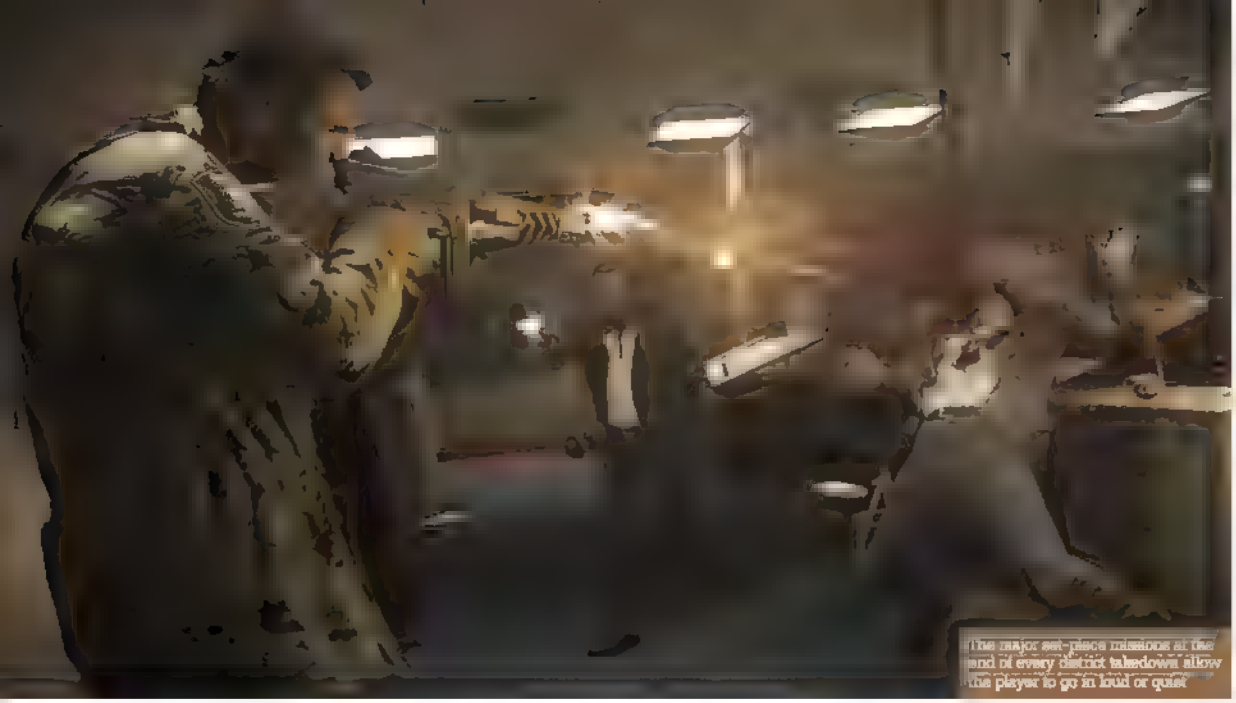
I see the direct benefit of the wiretaps when I move in on the location of a DeRazio enforcer. Holding down the back button on the Xbox One controller highlights the enemy positions in red before I even have line of sight, allowing me to assess the situation from outside the building and choose the proper tactic. In this instance, I choose the high ground and pick off the squealer so he can't run to the nearest payphone and call for backup. With that taken care of, I shoot all but one of the remaining thugs, choosing to engage with some fisticuffs. You

Mafia III has a diverse soundtrack from the 60's that includes rock 'n' roll, soul, and zydeco.

City Life

Previous Mafia games expressed an impressive attention to detail when it came to recreating towns of the '30s and '50s, but the well-crafted cities lacked vibrancy thanks to a severe shortage of pedestrians moving around town. Mafia III makes an earnest attempt to make New Bordeaux feel more alive.

During my time wandering around the downtown district, I noticed the civilian population has been drastically increased, and dynamic events like civil protests were not uncommon. I also noticed the police exhibiting different attitudes toward Lincoln. One cop chose to walk the other way when my towering antihero blocked his path, but another dropped a racial slur and tried to verbally put Lincoln in his place. When I clocked him, the other pedestrians on the sidewalk didn't seem to mind. Seems about right for a city that has always had a dubious relationship with law enforcement.



The major set-piece missions at the end of every district takedown allow the player to go in loud or quiet.

can seamlessly move from shooting to close quarters combat, and even string together some combos to pull off a brutal finishing move.

After wiping out another enforcer, grabbing a serious reserve of cash we found thanks to roughing up an informant, and taking down the leader of the construction fraud, I've finally inflicted enough damage to draw DeRazio out. Hooking up with Donovan, the game transitions to a congressional testimony that takes place sometime in the future. Donovan is getting grilled on how Lincoln got to DeRazio, to which Donovan admits he placed bugs and wiretaps all through the city. The cutscene then shifts to Tony DeRazio paying a visit to an underling whose kickbacks have been slightly late. DeRazio shoots him in the head and hands over the responsibilities to a new guy named Dominick, telling him to collect all the outstanding money owed and deliver it to the Royal Hotel.

From here, the player has a couple of options. You can go into the hotel guns blazing, or hijack Dominick's car and infiltrate via the underground parking garage. I choose the latter option, stealthily taking down enemies from behind to avoid setting off alarms that would signal my attack.

This section of the demo feels like classic Mafia, with a well-detailed set-piece mission that covers multiple floors of the hotel and culminates with DeRazio shooting a rocket launcher at Lincoln after he breaks into his office. After dodging the missile, Lincoln throws DeRazio through the window and watches as he splatters on a parked car below.

From here Lincoln must make his way out of the hotel, which is now swarmed by both mobsters and the police. I find a fire exit that leads back to the underground garage, steal a new car, and drive away undetected.

With the district now in Lincoln's control, the demo shifts to a sit-down between him and his three lieutenants. Cassandra has already been given multiple districts, so she's content no matter what I do, but Burke and Vito feel like dogs begging for scraps at the table. Since both are already running a hideout in this area, I will be screwing over one of them by handing over district control to the other.

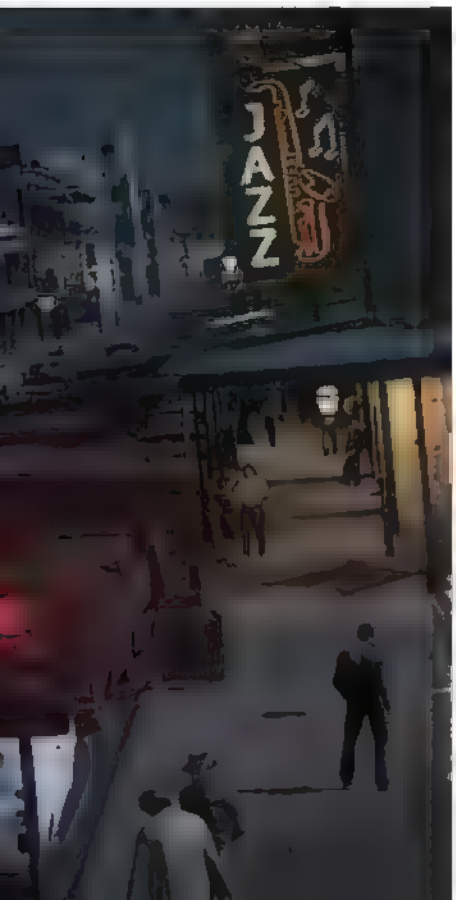
Each choice comes with rewards like new weapons or favors, but the player must also decide how much diplomacy they should use with Lincoln. When I give the district to Vito (what can I say, I'm sentimental), Burke says, "There's only so much s---ting on an Irishman can take before he wipes it from his eyes and comes at you with both barrels." Clearly my alliance is now on shaky grounds.

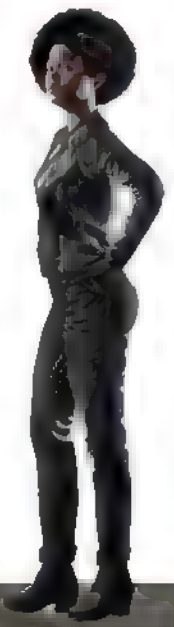
This situation plays out differently depending on the choices you make throughout the game. We're excited to explore the variety when Mafia III debuts in October. » **Matt Bertz**

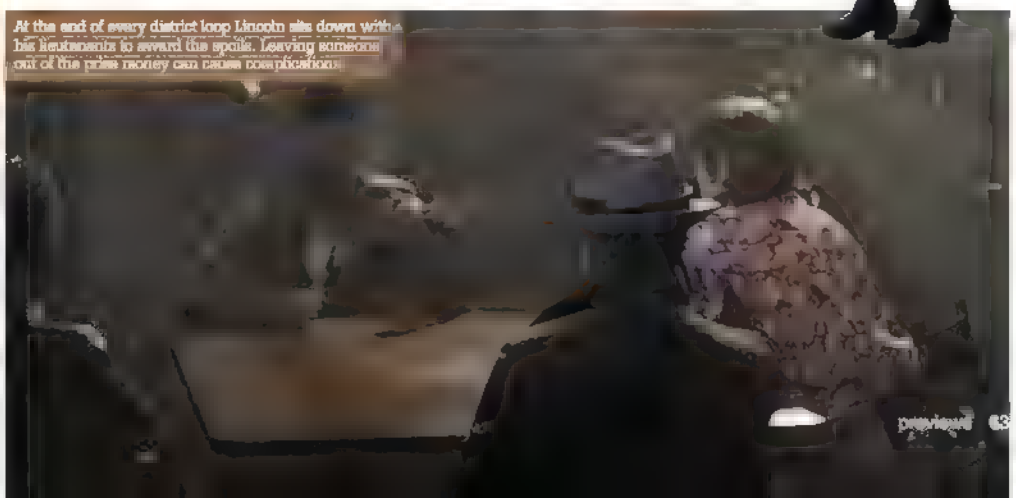
Music To Fit The Era

You can't set a game specifically in 1968 without tapping into the time period's rich music history. Our hands-on demo of Mafia III demonstrated that Hangar 13 is on the right path to a fantastic and varied soundtrack, with songs from The Animals, The Beach Boys, Sam Cooke, Cream, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Dusty Springfield, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, and The Rolling Stones, among others.

New Orleans is home to its own rich musical tapestry, which appears to be represented to some degree as well. We heard one track from "King of Zydeco" Clifton Chenier while cruising through the NOLA facsimile New Bordeaux.







At the end of every district loop Lincoln sits down with his lieutenants to award the spoils. Leaving someone out of the prize money can cause complications.

Paragon

It's not a party until the wraith shows up

Platform
PlayStation 4 • PC

Style
10-Player MOBA

Publisher
Epic Games

Developer
Epic Games

Release
2016

Paragon's early access season started last month and is available to anyone who pays $20 for the Founder's Pack. This gives purchasers access to the game in its early form and allows them to keep their progress once the retail version of the game launches. We took advantage of this early look at the game and went hands-on with several heroes, including newcomer Sevarog, added to the character roster a few weeks after the early season started.

Paragon remains more or less the same game it was at the launch of the early access period. You and your team try to rush down lanes with your minions, sending them to distract security turrets while you work on destroying towers. The goal is to reach the other enemy's core and blow it to pieces.

Hero Sevarog is a markedly different character from the other heroes available in the roster, mostly because his design leans hard into dark fantasy tropes, while the majority of other heroes would be more at home in a sci-fi novel. He's a cloaked wraith who wields a deadly hammer capable of bringing the pain to foes and minions. He also has a useful siphon attack that boosts his maximum health whenever he uses it to land a killing blow. These perks give you a lot of incentive to tank with Sevarog, pushing him to the front lines of battle to smash enemies into submission while your allies fire on them from afar.

The wraith's most powerful ability is colossal blow, which is exactly what it sounds like: a powerful swing of the hammer that deals heavy damage and sends enemies flying across the landscape. This can be particularly useful when heroes are near your towers but not getting too close because they don't have enough minions to distract the turrets. Bopping them into the turrets' range will likely mean their demise.

Our experience with matches ran the gamut from being exhilarating experiences to tedious back-and-forth exchanges that went on for too long. Like most MOBAs, Paragon's entertainment factor hinges on whether or not you're playing with a team of people who know what they're doing and are keeping in constant contact with one another about the match as it unfolds, sharing strategies and updates.

Matches where we played with strangers or without communication abilities were a mixed bag, with a number of them descending into chaos, with teammates fanning out in every direction with no detailed battleplan. Occasionally this resulted in a good time, but on the whole these matches ran without one side making any strides over the other for half an hour or more.

Paragon remains the sturdy, enjoyable MOBA it was when it debuted last month, and its steady content drip of heroes and content looks to help the game grow as early adopters experiment with new team combinations and strategies. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Zero Time Dilemma

One last escape

Zero Time Dilemma, the final game in the Zero Escape trilogy, looks to shake things up while retaining the series' sinister brand of zaniness. Taking place between the previous two installments (999 and Virtue's Last Reward), players control three teams of three people, all of whom are trying to escape deadly games devised by diabolical mastermind Zero. The plot thickens as the bracelets from 999 and Virtue's Last Reward return. However, instead of detonating a bomb inside the wearers or poisoning them, these bracelets inject characters with a special sleeping drug every 90 minutes. When the injected characters wake up from their nap, their memories have been erased, which is sure to make for some loopy fun in the plot.

The biggest change for this entry is the text-based segments that dominated the prior entries are being replaced by animated and fully voiced cutscenes. The cast of unfortunate victims in Zero Time Dilemma includes new faces as well as returning characters, like Sigma and Junpei. During puzzle segments, players attempt to escape deadly traps while controlling a variety of characters. After these sequences, players are forced to make difficult choices that can determine the fate of other characters – often with randomized outcomes.

During the demo I saw, one trap involved a revolver loaded with three blanks and three live rounds being pointed at a character's head. In the first playthrough of the puzzle, one of the blanks went off, and the character survived. In the second, one of the live rounds fired instead, so the character perished.

Another wrench in the established formula is events can be played out of chronological order, with the player having the option of jumping around at various points in Dilemma's massive branching timeline. You can shift between any of the three teams at any time. However, it's probably not a good idea to get too attached, according to Aksys, the only way for the nine characters to escape the facility they're trapped in is to reach an elevator in the middle of this facility that requires six passwords. Passwords are only given up when a player dies, meaning ostensibly there can only be three survivors.

Zero Time Dilemma is intended to be a plot-independent game, meaning players who haven't played the other two entries should be able to comprehend the storyline, but Aksys claims this installment will tie up certain mysteries left unresolved by the other games.

From the lengthy demo of gameplay we saw, it seems Zero Time Dilemma is positioned to deliver what fans of the series have come to expect, while also being enough of a standalone game to draw in newcomers who enjoy sadistic brainteasers. » **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
3DS • Vita • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Aksys Games

» **Developer**
Chime

» **Release**
June 28

Gears Of War 4

Stick together, stay alive

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
The Coalition

» [redacted]
October 11

When we visited The Coalition's studio for our Gears of War 4 cover story, the team played its cards rather close to the chest when we asked about multiplayer. A month later, I got about two hours of hands-on time with the multiplayer component. The two modes I played were team deathmatch and a new mode to the series called Dodgeball. I had a great time with both modes, though Dodgeball was the one I enjoyed more thanks to the innovations it brings to Gears' tried-and-true multiplayer formula.

In Dodgeball, every member of the team has one life. If you're taken out, you're removed from the match... unless one of your teammates kills someone on the enemy team. If that happens, and the player who did the killing can stay alive for a few seconds, one of the player's deceased teammates respawns. If there are multiple dead players on a team, they're lined up in a respawn queue, and each kill their team makes the next player come back to life.

This mode creates exciting matches because the back-and-forth struggle is so chaotic that even if it's one player versus five, that one player still has a solid chance of turning the tide. Victory is never assured until an entire team is wiped out. I had Dodgeball matches that ended in seconds, while others went on for long stretches of time. The mode is just as entertaining and heart-pounding to watch as it is to play.

Though it's not as exciting as Dodgeball, team deathmatch functions like it has in previous Gears of War titles and is enjoyable. Each team has a limited number of spawns for everyone to share, which encourages players to work together instead of bouncing about the map on their own. These matches were fun, but they didn't shake things up from previous iterations of the mode. The gunplay is gruesome and new mechanics (like grabbing an enemy out of cover and performing a brutal knife execution) add more strategies that you can pull off on the battlefield.

The Coalition seems aware of the importance of making Gears matches fun to watch; studio head Rod Fergusson and lead multiplayer designer Ryan Cleven shed light on the role eSports and streaming have in helping shape Gears of War 4's multiplayer. "Our ambitions for eSports go beyond the confines of the boxed product," Fergusson says. "One of the nice things about multiplayer is that multiplayer lives on beyond the initial window where people consume the campaign. Our plan is that we have to have a baseline for functionality and spectator mode for casting and those sorts of things to legitimize that initial phase. But then after we release the product, then there's an ability to progress even further and grow that service more."

The Coalition has been bringing in Twitch personalities and streamers during development to provide invaluable feedback for spectating features. The Coalition is also devising a ranking system for its map playlists to provide skilled players and competitors with challenging matches, while also making accommodations for newcomers. For example, players have a surprising amount of control over bots in multiplayer matches. You can even set up matches with an entire team of humans versus one made of bots, so you can practice teamwork tactics. Bot matches also net players experience points for the progression system to make players feel like they're earning something for their time.

I walked away from my time with Gears 4's multiplayer impressed with how The Coalition is planning to balance the needs of eSports participants and casual players as well as just having had a lot of fun with the playtest. Dodgeball, in particular, is a great addition to the series and something I look forward to spending more time with once the game is released.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

Sniper Elite 4

One shot, one kill, new setting

Few franchises can reliably pull winces from their fans. Mortal Kombat is an obvious one, but Sniper Elite gives NetherRealm's gory fighter a run for its money. Rebellion's stealth series is known for its invasive bullet cam that allows players to see the carnal impact of a fast-moving projectile as it rips through the human form. Bones shatter, blood spurts, and bodies crumple to the ground.

Sniper Elite 4 takes protagonist Karl Fairburne to Italy in 1943. The game features a number of improvements from previous entries, like larger maps. In fact, the smallest one is three times the size of Sniper Elite 3's largest map. This creates a new sense of openness as you plot your path to objectives. Rebellion also gives the enemies on those maps more complex behaviors to track the players' actions.

If you happen to stack corpses like cordwood in a specific area, soldiers start to avoid it. This forces players to change their tactics. Likewise, enemies more reliably investigate corpses discovered in the environment. This creates better opportunities for booby-trapping dead bodies, but also could expose you to discovery.

Enemy officers on the field also play into strategic considerations. If still alive, they urge their troops forward to hunt you. If the officer is dead, the enemy soldiers are more likely to hunker down and take cover. If you've laid traps, you might just want a flood of enemies coming your way.

The long-range shooting is Sniper Elite's most important feature, and it is receiving a major overhaul. You can now use your binoculars to range shots. Doing so allows you to more easily account for bullet drop over long distances. If you've ranged a target, placing your reticle over it while scoped in automatically compensates for gravity.

In addition to a fully cooperative campaign for two, players can expect cooperative multiplayer modes to return from previous entries. These will likely include the spotter/sniper mode called Overwatch and the wave-based Survival. ▪ **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Sold Out

» **Developer**
Rebellion

» **Release**
2016

Planet Coaster

Looping back to the glory days

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Frontier Developments

» Developer
Frontier Developments

» Release
2016

Ever since RollerCoaster Tycoon popularized theme-park sims nearly two decades ago, the genre has appeared in many different forms. Several of those unique takes have come from Frontier Developments. The developer behind RollerCoaster Tycoon 3, Thrillville, and Screamride is back with Planet Coaster, a new IP that veers even closer to the genre's original concept.

Frontier Development had two main goals when starting work on Planet Coaster. "The first goal was to ensure players have the means to build whatever they want, whether that be accurately building their favorite theme parks or creating unique fantasy worlds," says chief creative officer Jonny Watts. "The second was to engineer the deepest simulation ever experienced in a coaster game."

Paying attention to how visitors behave is front and center. Customers have a set amount of money that they spend only if you give them reason to. Along with monitoring guest behavior, different campaign modes add to the challenge and offer variety. The objectives range from revitalizing a dying park using nothing but your entrepreneurial savvy and profits from selling old rides to constructing a park on rocky terrain with strict building regulations. "We've always seen these scenarios as 'coaster-park puzzles,' with some being quite traditional and some being slightly esoteric," Watts says.

Just like with other games in the genre, you can build non-coaster rides and attractions

In the early build I played, I created a park from scratch. I could choose between several kinds of landscapes to base my park. The first thing I noticed as the area loaded was how great the game looks. The water shimmers as light hits it, and the cliff sides are detailed even when you zoom in.

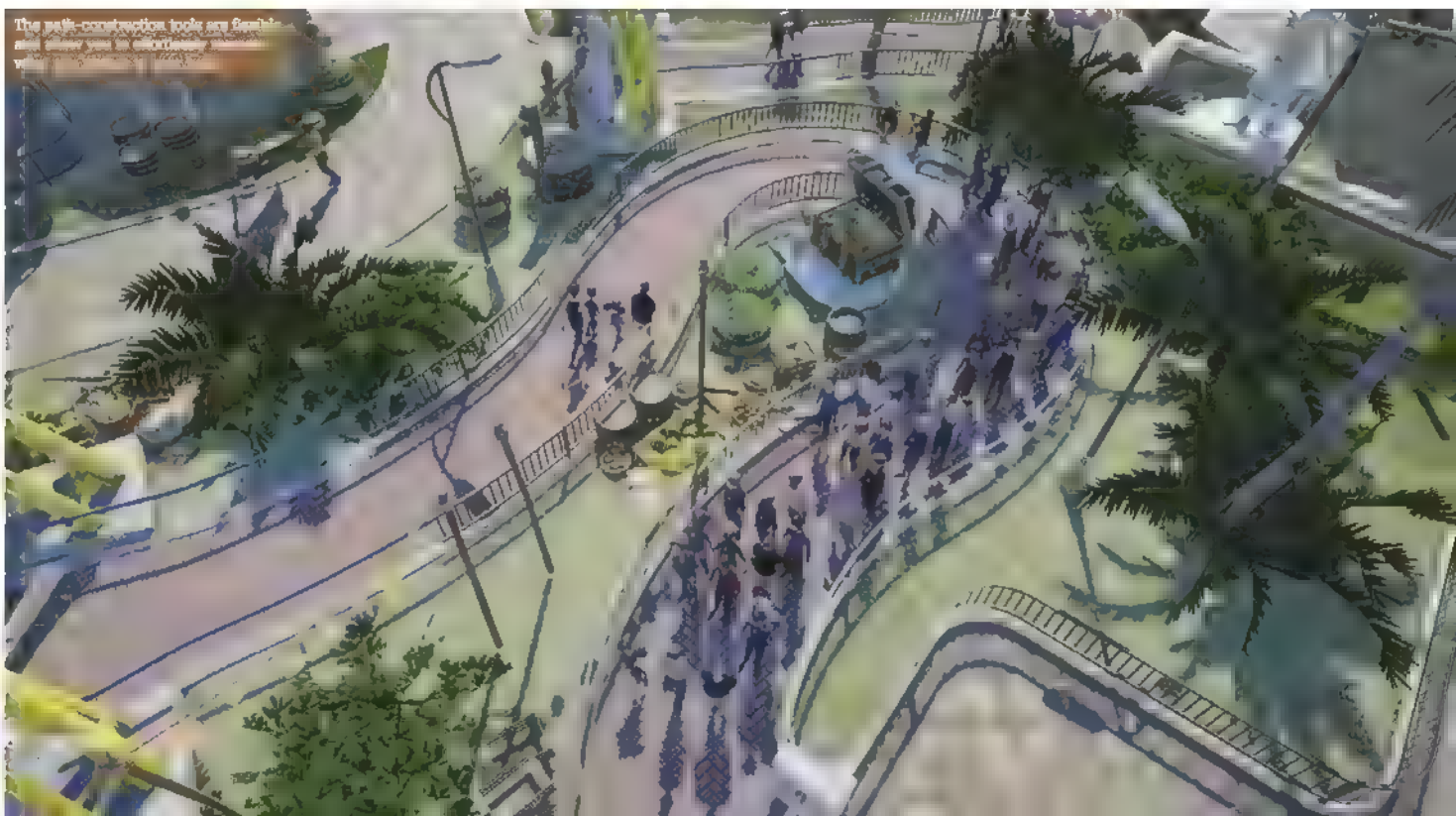
The path construction tool is flexible, paths curve smoothly and auto-snap to nearby paths. I sometimes experienced issues where the paths wouldn't snap where I thought they should, but constructing my park's walkways was often a clean experience.

Disappointingly, the build didn't have the coaster-creation tools in place yet, so I was unable to experience this big element of the game. Watts says that authenticity is at the forefront of everything the team does with the coaster tools. "We want the players to build authentic-looking coasters where the cars are driven with real physics, and for them to be totally credible," he says.

In addition, Planet Coaster lets you get creative with your buildings, as you can craft modular structures. Whether you want to build a castle for your bathrooms or a burger-themed archway over a path, the tools allow you to do so with creative ease.

With smooth and flexible creation tools, Planet Coaster aims to let you create the park you've always wanted to visit – whether that's a serious park with perfectly feasible layouts or a fantastical carnival with miles of steep paths and inconceivable designs. If Frontier can refine the tools that are already in the game and deliver on the pieces that haven't yet been put in place, Planet Coaster could be the park-sim game fans of the genre's heyday have been waiting for.

» **Brian Shea**



The path-construction tools are flexible

Total War: Warhammer

Taking the series to the front lines of fantasy

By now, we're all accustomed to the Total War series' real-time blend of sword-chopping, cavalry-flanking goodness and stronghold-building, economy-cultivating strategy. For the new instalment, the franchise is sloughing off the chains of history and reality to bring a fantasy vision of the Warhammer universe into the fold. While the title retains many of the aspects that make the series distinct, the bold directions that make it different add zest for fans of both the traditional series and the Warhammer IP.

A recent extended hands-on with the game had us playing as the Vampire Counts, one of four available factions. Taking this motley assortment of undead troops out for a spin in both campaign and large-scale battle modes was a blast. Unit variety is extensive, ranging from unending hordes of skeletons and zombies to fast units like fell bats and dire wolves – and horrors of the battlefield like the terrorgheist.

Unit selection is one thing, but the cool part of drawing from Warhammer is the fact the team at Creative Assembly can make the factions entirely disparate. The Vampire Counts have absolutely no ranged units. Instead, their ranks possess the powers of speed and strength, allowing them to quickly flank or pummel enemy units with hit-and-run and avalanche tactics. Unlike other factions and units, undead units do not suffer morale or leadership penalties, and can induce terror into opposing forces.

Combine those tactics with magic and the Counts' lack of ranged options seems balanced. Using legendary characters like Mannfred von Carstein to blow apart the battlefield with buffs, debuffs, magical attacks, and even necromantic resurrection is incredibly potent, and keeps the player invested in the battle at all times, even when issuing mundane commands to take out menial troops.

Off the battlefield, players can expect all the crafty economic choices and resource manipulation that other titles in the franchise offer, taking and sacking locations, and enhancing your army's abilities through talent tree choices. It's a fantastic balance between the careful, tactical decisions that have defined the series through historically rooted fare and Warhammer's fantasy world of greenskins, dwarves, and vampires. While the Warhammer IP has been used in every genre under the sun at this point, this pairing with the Total War series seems like an inspired match.

» **Daniel Tack**

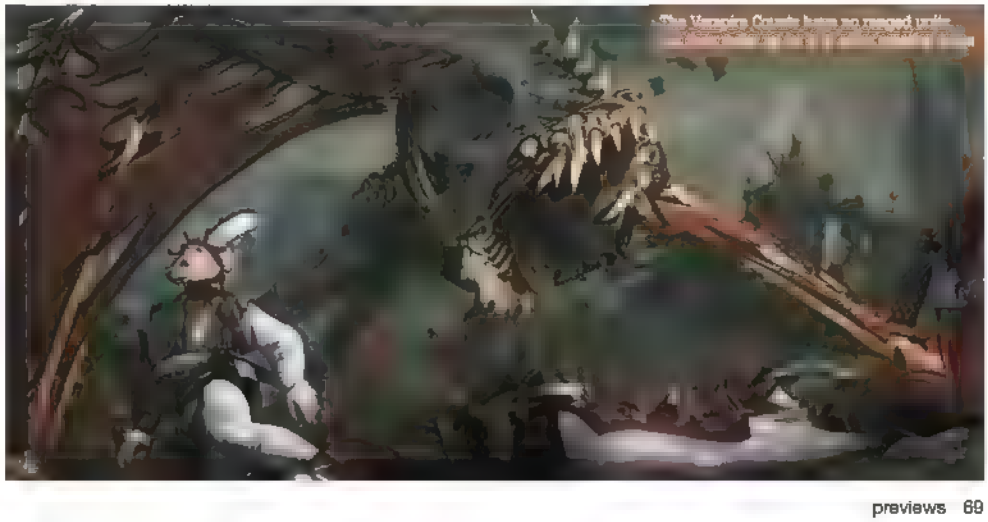
Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(8-Player Online)

Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Creative Assembly

Release
May 24



The Unspoken

Insomniac casts a virtual spell

Platform
Rift

» Style
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Oculus Studios

» Developer
Insomniac Games

» Release
Holiday

One of the major critiques of the virtual-reality landscape to this point is the lack of major developers contributing games. Insomniac has proved to be one of the big exceptions to that trend, as the developer behind Ratchet & Clank and Sunset Overdrive has already announced three full VR titles. While the survival-horror game Edge of Nowhere and the mystic brawler Feral Rites are both third-person action titles, The Unspoken is Insomniac's premiere attempt at a first-person virtual-reality game.

The Unspoken puts you in the shoes of a mage in an alternate-history version of Chicago. You enter a fight club for magicians and must duel rival wizards to gain control of the city. You do that through online PvP matches in environments full of traversable platforms. "Initially, we start you out with a few parlor tricks, but as you progress you learn more spells, you learn to summon golems, and your powers start to manifest themselves in blinding displays of arcane energy," says studio and creative director Chad Dezern.

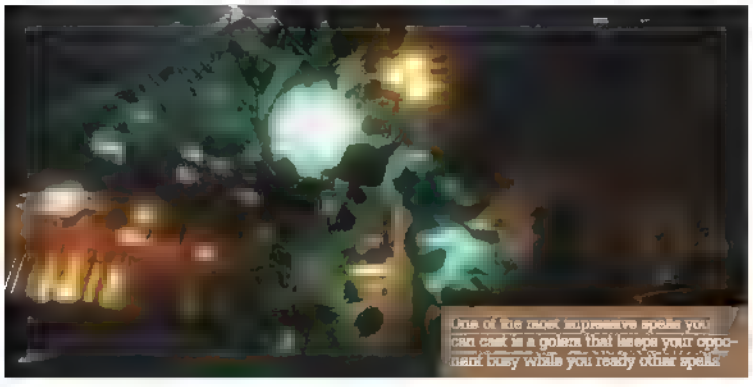
To make the casting feel as intuitive as possible, Insomniac developed The Unspoken to work exclusively with the Oculus Touch controllers, which are scheduled to release later this year. "Our goal is to let the player feel like they're casting spells with their bare hands," Dezern says. "It's a lot about feeling like you're discovering what you can do as you play. The nuance of gesture that you put into every spell actually has a big impact on the outcome of the battle."

With the effectiveness of your spells riding on the accuracy of your gestures, casting is a skill that you can improve upon over time. More involved spells like hammering an anvil to craft a javelin must be gestured with a degree of accuracy, but even a basic spell like shooting a fireball requires you to maintain steady aim while blasting your enemy. The game is centered on online competition, but there are modes for players to practice their casting against A.I. opponents.

While The Unspoken isn't a full-room experience like something found on the HTC Vive – movement from platform to platform is done through teleportation – it uses the Rift's tracker for movement on a single platform. This allows for actions like ducking behind cover and moving within a space approximately two feet wide.

The teleportation between platforms is where strategy comes into play. Strategic high points exist, giving players the upper hand in certain situations. That means that in order to get the jump on your opponent, you need to have situational and environmental awareness. Even if your opponent gets advantageous positioning, you can still look across and see what your adversary is casting and try and use the appropriate spell to counter.

Though The Unspoken is the furthest away of Insomniac's announced VR games, it is one of the more eye-catching offerings of the Rift's upcoming lineup. If Insomniac can effectively capture the feeling of facing off against a rival using high-powered magic, it could be one of the Rift's games to watch. » Brian Shea



One of the most impressive spells you can cast is a golem that keeps your opponent busy while you ready other spells.

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Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE

Performing like a pop star for a quirky crossover

» [redacted]
Wii U

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Atlus

» [redacted]
June 24

The Shin Megami Tensei and Fire Emblem franchises have always been serious affairs, so when this crossover between the two was announced, many expected a straight-faced experience. However, the first trailer depicted vibrant characters dancing like pop stars, which raised more questions about the game than it answered. I sat down for two hours of hands-on time with Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE to learn more. So far it's plenty silly, but I love how it embraces Japanese culture and has fun nods to both series.

Tokyo Mirage Sessions is set in present-day Tokyo and thrives on Japan's enthusiasm for its fashion and pop idols. This story is centered on superstars mysteriously disappearing and having their creative energy stolen. You play Itsuki, a mostly silent protagonist who you choose responses for similar to the main characters in the Persona and SMT series. To set things right, you must enter the Idolasphere, which transports you to an alternate dimension, and use your talent by performing on the battlefield to save the day.

To fight back against the baddies, you need to tap into the power of characters from Fire Emblem. For instance, your main character fuses with Awakening's Chrom to learn his special sword attacks, and I also had party members team up with Caeda and Cain from Shadow Dragon. Part of the mystery is figuring out why the Fire Emblem characters are along for the ride, but at least they're pulling their weight in the meantime.

The dungeons are true to SMT, with varied themes and uniquely designed monsters to match them. As you explore, evil spirits called Mirages attack you (but you get an advantage if you strike them first). The turn-based battle system will be familiar to anyone who has played an SMT game; it's all about exploiting elemental weaknesses, but it also taps into Fire Emblem with weapon weaknesses and mastery levels allowing you to learn new skills.

The combo system, called sessions, allows for even more strategy on the battlefield. If you exploit an enemy's weakness and your party members have a session skill to match it, they follow up with an attack for a devastating combo. It's like getting in an extra turn. Sessions make the battle system feel new and exciting by taking staples from both series – weaknesses and follow-up attacks – and making them essential to your success. Landing combos is satisfying, and missing your opportunity could mean death.

I also saw creative dungeons, such as one devoted to fashion, where I had to change mannequin poses to get to other areas. Boss battles also had fun twists, like giving you multiple enemies but tasking you with only attacking the one with dark essence, forcing you to pay attention to visual cues. When you're not in dungeons, you explore different districts in Tokyo, and can hang out at your home base (a talent agency), take lessons at the studio for bonuses, and craft weapons to give you new skills.

Tokyo Mirage Sessions is targeted at those who have a love for either series and Japan's popular culture, and there's something endearing about the way it uses the concepts from both. I grinned as I watched the first Fire Emblem and SMT character fusion, and enjoyed alternating between alternative dimensions and exploring Tokyo. Bizarre as it may be, it definitely feels like its own unique experience, fully committing to its pop-star premise. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Metroid Prime: Federation Force

Metroid in name only

When Nintendo announced Metroid Prime: Federation Force as a cooperative first-person shooter at E3 2015, it was met with its fair share of criticism. Most fans had been pining for a new mainline entry, and this concept seemed a far cry from the exploration and atmosphere that defines the series. While this isn't the Metroid we want, it's the Metroid we're getting for now. I went hands-on with Federation Force to see what it has to offer, and I'm still scratching my head at what is supposed to make it interesting.

Federation Force allows you to team up with three other friends through online or local play and take on various missions. You can solo everything if you want, but the game is built for a multiplayer experience. You're put in the shoes of a marine of the Galactic Federation, piloting a mech that you can customize and unlock additional skins for. You visit three different planets with a slew of missions, offering different objectives. Before each quest, you pick certain mods with effects like extending the power of elemental attacks or taking less damage. In addition, before each mission, the team gets to choose special items to bring, such as a certain amount of missiles or health packs.

Levels have you shooting at baddies, finding mods in hidden areas, and taking down big bosses. The first-person aiming is done with the gyroscope, which may sound like a turnoff, but it works well and was a better experience for me than most games that implement it. Those who have a New 3DS can use the c-stick to aim.

In the few levels I played, I experienced everything from dodging poisonous gasses to breaking boxes for special keys to shooting a big ball toward a cannon to launch it at a boss. Some bosses were chaotic and forced the group to communicate and work together. However, many of the tasks I completed were tedious and bland, such as shooting a ball down a path where it can easily fall off, forcing you to start over. At the end of each level, players are ranked, and the order determines who gets their pick of the mods the team grabbed.

I only experienced a small slice of Federation Force, so I'm hoping later levels are more fun to play. As it stands, this early look didn't sell me on it. » Kimberley Wallace

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Next Level Games

» **Release**
Spring

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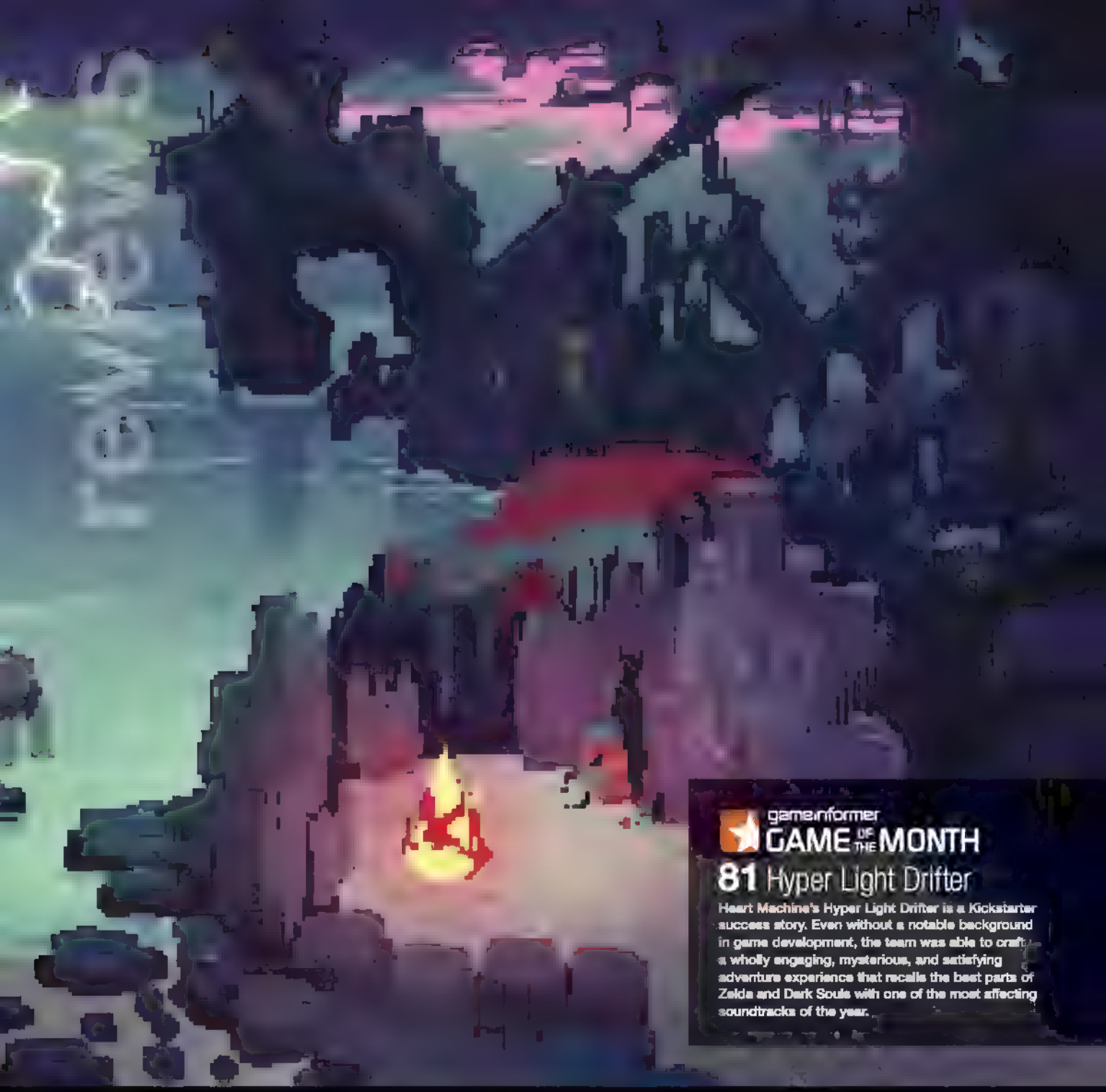

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

81 Hyper Light Drifter

Heart Machine's Hyper Light Drifter is a Kickstarter success story. Even without a notable background in game development, the team was able to craft a wholly engaging, mysterious, and satisfying adventure experience that recalls the best parts of Zelda and Dark Souls with one of the most affecting soundtracks of the year.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Pointless.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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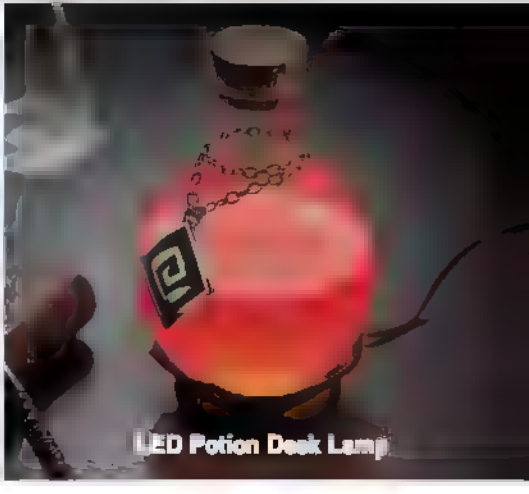

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Salt And Sanctuary

Finding the soul of 2D action

8.5

gamerformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Ska Studios **Developer** Ska Studios **Release** March 15 **Rating** M

PS4 • PC • Vita

» Concept
Build up a character as you explore a deadly island filled with forgotten dungeons and undead monstrosities

» Graphics
The 2D art style echoes Ska's previous work, the dark gothic tone is a good match for the setting, but washed out colors may be a turn-off for some

» Sound
Potent monster sound effects are chilling, and an intermittent musical score maintains an appropriate atmosphere

» Playability
A steep learning curve in the early hours is likely to scare off some players, but smart leveling and specializing in a play style gradually lead to mastery

» Entertainment
Mashing together the challenge of Dark Souls with the platforming and combat styling of Castlevania makes for a challenging but highly rewarding formula

» Replay Value
High

Salt and Sanctuary wears its inspirations on its sleeve. Borrowing the progression, class system, and checkpoint method of Dark Souls, and the 2D combat, platforming, and level design approach of Castlevania, Ska Studios' most ambitious game to date sits in the mind space precisely between the two. The pillars of its gameplay may not be original, but the immaculate balancing, massive game world, gratifying combat, and local cooperative play all ensure Salt and Sanctuary deserves consideration in the same breath as the games to which it pays homage.

Character creation communicates the first hints of the depth on offer. Multiple classes each provide distinct play styles, including agile ranged combatants, devastating mages, whip-wielding hunters, and armored knights. Having played with several builds, I'm impressed how each offers a novel experience, and is still balanced to confront the many combat challenges that lie ahead, as well as the seemingly endless options for armor and weapons that each cater to different strategies. After creation, character development is freeform along a thoughtfully constructed grid of interconnecting abilities, allowing for dynamic build development. Unfortunately, with the exception of a rare item that allows for minor adjustments to your selected upgrade path, there's no way to respec. As such, experimentation isn't really encouraged; any given character is best served by specialization along one or two distinct upgrade paths.

Little in the way of linear storytelling is here, but the richly imagined setting picks up some of the slack. The mysterious island upon which you are shipwrecked is a bleak and foreboding place, populated with undead creatures and dungeon complexes displaced from place and time. The coveted substance of salt is the currency of character improvement, easily lost if you die in the world and fail to retrieve it from your killer. Hidden sanctuaries must be dedicated to your god of choice, thereafter becoming a haven for you and the villagers you summon to that location, including blacksmiths, merchants, alchemists, and even fast-travel guides to interconnect your web of discovered locations.

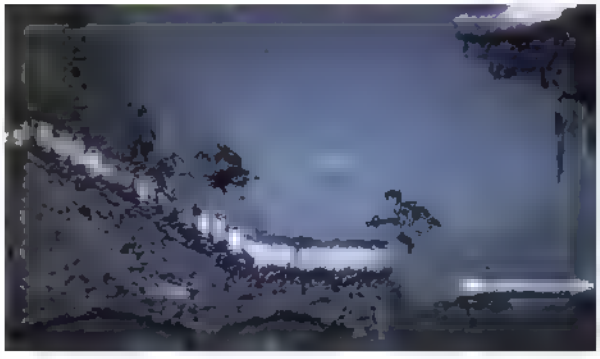
Expanding your network of save points and filling it with vendors provides a sense of improvement above and beyond personal character development, although just like in the From Software games that popularized the concept, you'll be furious more than once when you die far from a checkpoint, or you can't find one in the maze of corridors. That's especially true because of the absence of any in-game map or navigation aids; chalk it up to hardcore difficulty if you like, but being lost rarely adds up to fun.

The early hours are the most frustrating as you learn the rhythm of movement, dodging, blocking, and various attack options. The most skilled players may be able to move without delay into the mid-game, but many players will share my experience, and be forced to grind frequently in these beginning hours to be a match for the difficult early bosses. That's a shame, because the natural flow of exploration, and the sheer size of the game, is more than enough to be entertaining without the need to fruitlessly run in circles in the name of level advancement.

The many secret areas, dozens of enemy types, and variety of equipment options keep things engaging even when forward momentum stalls. Familiarity with the game's systems help smooth out progression after those introductory hours, and I fell into a pleasant tempo of area exploration and using new upgrades to progress past previously inaccessible paths. The placement and pacing in these later sections is ideal, including optional zones, intriguing new powers, and even a path to an alternate ending. The visual and functional variety of the many bosses is a particular high point as the game builds towards its climax.

If you get lonely, almost the entirety of Salt and Sanctuary can be played together with a local co-op partner. You can even pop a special item to duel it out with your buddy. The co-op functionality eases a great deal of the potent challenge that defines the game, making it a great way for a broader segment of players to enjoy the game. Naming an appropriate class combo with your friend to best conquer your foes is a lot of fun. When the co-op options are considered alongside both a new-game-plus feature and the exhaustive character build variety, the replay potential skyrockets.

Ska Studios continually impresses with the ambition of its games, which are always defined by an impeccable attention to detail and tight moment-to-moment mechanics. That reputation for clean design continues unabated with Salt and Sanctuary. This nightmarish island is well worth a visit, even if you've never confronted the challenging games that engendered the adventure. » Matt Miller



Enter The Gungeon

Reloading the roguelike

gamerinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** Dodge Roll **Release** March 4 **Rating** NR

8.5

PS4 • PC • Mac

» **Concept**
Blast your way through procedurally generated levels in a classic twin-stick shooter roguelike

» **Graphics**
Gungeon pulls off the pixelated look in a cutesy, easy-on-the-eyes fashion

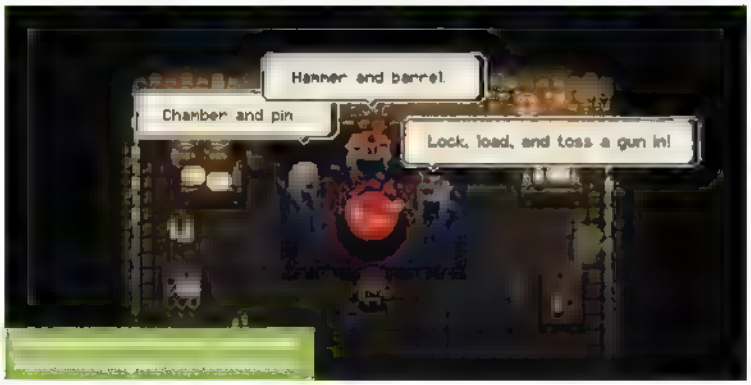
» **Sound**
Stock shooting, reloading, and exploding, but the soundtrack is great and does a lot to keep the action intense

» **Playability**
The basic mechanics are incredibly easy to understand, but a lot of practice and mastery become honed as the player moves through the Gungeon

» **Entertainment**
Succeeds as a shining example of the bullet-hell roguelike that's just tough enough without coddling the player

» **Replay Value**
High

Guns. Guns are unsurprisingly the name of the game in Enter the Gungeon, a challenging twin-stick shooter/roguelike in the vein of Binding of Isaac and Nuclear Throne – but it manages to top both of those titles with its procedurally generated dungeons, cool and colorful bosses, and arsenal of unique weapons and power-ups. From death to death, players unlock a bit of meta progression, secrets, and questlines to discover. Even when your dungeon run is a bust, you walk away with the sense that you made progress on your journey to claim the gun that can kill the past



A room-to-room tour of bullets and baddies ensues as you move through the floors, each level ending with a boss encounter. Death is just part of the game as you try to preserve your heart containers by dodging swarms of bullets and navigating quirky environmental hazards, like guns mounted on minecarts and explosive traps. Perhaps you find a shopkeeper where you can purchase a few "blanks," essential consumables that evaporate all on-screen projectiles at critical moments. Maybe you run into a quest NPC you didn't find on your last few runs. You certainly find guns, ranging from mundane revolvers to amazingly elaborate contraptions. I found a laser rifle that reflects bullets like a lightsaber when you reload, a Mega Man-inspired blaster, a T-shirt cannon, a fish that shoots out of a barrel, a beehive, and even a Bloodborne-inspired shield The guns are loaded with flavor and make every attempt a delight as you uncover each weapon You die and get sent back to the hub area a lot, but it never feels punishing or overwhelming because you're having too much fun discovering new things.

The gameplay isn't as demanding as some niche pure bullet-hells like Ikaruga or Touhou, but it's still plenty challenging, and you have to master the dodge roll if you plan on blasting your way to victory. The dodge roll features an invincibility window that you need to abuse if you plan on surviving when the screen fills up with ammo from every direction The core mechanics are simple – run, gun, roll, and reload – but they're also enjoyable to master.

The difference between your first outing and your twentieth dungeon run are markedly different, as you learn enemy patterns and abilities and nail the timing of your own movements. However, Gungeon skirts the line of negative repetition; fighting your 50th iron-maiden enemy or the dumb bird boss isn't quite as impactful as the first few encounters, but the title boasts enough variety to generally remain strong in the face of procedurally generated reiteration.

You select from four playable characters for each attempt at the Gungeon, all with their own bonus perks. I found the Marine to be the go-to choice, with a free point of armor and a handy ammo drop for when you find that perfect gun and want to make sure it lasts. Other characters offer things like Molotov cocktails or a cute pet, but the bonuses don't really make a huge difference; they're more like flavorful accents on the gameplay

Enter the Gungeon is an essential pick for those that are fans of the roguelike twin-stick shooter genre, and a great choice for those looking for an action-filled arcade romp as well. Even with permadeath threatening to ruin your fun around every corner, the vast selection of goofy guns and eventual discoveries keep you coming back again and again without any lingering frustration » **Daniel Tack**

MLB The Show 16

When authenticity isn't enough

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Sony Interactive Entertainment San Diego **Release** March 29 **Rating** E

PS4

» Concept
A series built on the fundamentals of the sport ventures into fantastical waters with new modes and abilities that have little to do with baseball

» Graphics
The new rendering technology brings out an even higher level of realism in the stadiums and player gear

» Sound
A nice selection of songs for menu management. The commentary team, while lacking fluidity still, does a nice job of piping in interesting and relevant stats into the games. Some lines are repeated heavily in Road to the Show

» Playability
The basic on-the-field play is nicely polished and true to the sport. The ability to skip loading screens in Road to the Show is nice. Showtime feels too much like a cheat

» Entertainment
The long-running series needed new experiences, and Sony delivered two that will make you spend more time in Diamond Dynasty

» Replay Value
High

When you attend a game of baseball in MLB The Show 16, you're not just going for the peanuts, Cracker Jack, or thrill of seeing a batter demolish a searing 97-mph fastball; you're going to watch a player disprove Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. Thanks to a new ability called "Showtime," used exclusively in any player-lock mode like Road to the Show, the fabric of reality can unravel at any given time in The Show 16, gifting your player with the god-like ability to slow time to a crawl. With Showtime active, that 97-mph fastball ends up looking like a lazy balloon floating to the plate.

For a series that I applaud annually for getting baseball's smallest details right, The Show now appears to have its sights set on mimicking popular video game conventions. Last year, players could wear gear to artificially reward ability bumps. This year, the Showtime mechanic smacks of a mutant gene from a superhero game. While I like the spectacle of Showtime, such as seeing my fielder dive for a ball in super slow motion, it's more of a misrepresentation of the sport than anything. It feels cheap. Showtime doesn't guarantee success, but there's obviously less of a chance of a strike out, error, or poorly struck ball. Although a limited resource, it is cheating in the most video game way possible.

Road to the Show also stumbles mightily with its Showtime-based perk system that guarantees outcomes like flyballs or all pitches being in the strike zone. Couple these additions with the returning trading-card system, and suddenly, skill doesn't matter that much anymore. This year's takeaway: Build your baseball Iron Man, select his powers, and you'll make it to the big leagues in no time.

Diamond Dynasty, Sony's online-focused mode in which you are tasked to create a fictional team and build its roster through collectible player cards, has received a fair number of notable additions this year. This is where I ended up spending most of my time, willingly, and having a good time doing so. For the first time in Show history, Diamond Dynasty is the mode I recommend players invest their time in. Through the new avenues of play, I was pleased to find I was earning new cards left and right, and I could fly through match-ups almost as quickly as a player-locked game.

Diamond Dynasty's biggest hooks come in unconventional baseball ways. The first is Conquest mode, a grid-based battle across the United States in which every MLB baseball team (and your fictional one) vie for territorial control.

The second way is Battle Royale, a mode that offers a revolving door of competition with nice rewards... if you can afford it. You have to pay 1,500 studs (the in-game currency) to compete in Battle Royale each time. It's a pay-to-play mode.

Battle Royale mode is the most fun I've had battling other players in The Show, but the net code behind it isn't as reliable as it should be, a problem this series has struggled with since venturing online. Some games were loaded with lag and strange fielding freezes. Instances like this are unacceptable in short, three-inning games that are usually decided by one run.

Stat junkies are going to love this year's Franchise mode. Almost every little statistic you can think of – including wins above replacement – is tracked. Managing an organization is a little more complex this year, as the trade logic for rival GMs is much improved, budgets can be tricky to stay on top of, and you have to factor in player morale for everything including free-agent signings. Star players bring many demands, and if you don't hold up your end of the bargain, they'll play angry and affect the outcomes of the club. A bit more babysitting is required for Franchise mode, but I did feel like a GM with my hand in everything.

I harped on The Show last year for its lack of new experiences, and Sony answered that call with two big additions to Diamond Dynasty. They don't scream of America's Greatest Pastime in any capacity – mascot races make more sense – but they are welcome diversions that prop up The Show's excellent on-the-field play (which still fits like a well-worn glove). The series is moving away from being an authentic baseball simulation, but for longtime players, these pie-in-the-sky ideas are just what this baseball series needs. » **Andrew Reiner**

Ratchet & Clank

Sweet nostalgia

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** April 12 **Rating** E10+

8.25

PS4

Ratchet & Clank is a relic of yesteryear, a survivor from an age when anthropomorphic characters were all the rage in video games. Crash Bandicoot. Sonic the Hedgehog. Sly Cooper. Banjo. Conker. Daxter Insomniac Games' space-faring critter stood tall with these iconic characters, but as gamer tastes and technology matured, the bandicoot mysteriously vanished, and the hedgehog became one of the biggest punch lines in gaming. One by one, these characters faded out of the limelight. Ratchet somehow escaped the culling, and more impressively, has remained a constant fixture in games since his debut in 2002 – though his significance in the gaming landscape has diminished through the years. Here's the scary part: After starring in over a dozen games to date, his popularity may soar to new heights when the *Ratchet & Clank* movie opens in theaters on April 29.

While it seems backwards and wrong that a new Ratchet & Clank video game would be adapted from the film, which in turn is based on his original game, that's exactly what we are getting. Parts of this game are taken directly from Ratchet & Clank's PS2 debut, placing it slightly in remake territory. Other elements, like plot points and characters, are mined directly from the film, turning it into somewhat of a movie game. A large portion of the content is also entirely new and true to the latest installments in the series, moving it slightly into the realm of a sequel. As oddly Frankensteined as this experience is, it can best be summed up as immensely entertaining, and a worthy successor to Ratchet's latest endeavors.

Some challenges, story sequences, and locations are recycled from the original 2002 game, but they don't come across as retro at any time. The wealth of new content injected into the classic content dramatically affects the challenges and gameplay flow. I was struck more with a sense of déjà vu flaring up throughout the adventure than the feeling of returning to something old.

Ratchet repels the enemy onslaught with nimble movements (including the jet pack from Ratchet & Clank Future: Into the Nexus) and a beefed up arsenal. The new Pixelizer HD is as beautiful to watch as it is fun to use; it kicks like a space mule and transforms every enemy it hits into a sea of retro pixels. Other weapons are equally amusing, like the Raptor Launcher, which challenges the player to pause for a few seconds to establish multiple target locks. All of the weapons feature upgrade paths and can be leveled up five times to deliver more damage, but the leveling process is unfortunately quick. Weapons can be capped in no time flat, meaning you might want to shelve them in favor of upgrading other firearms to become more powerful.

On top of the redesigned content, this Ratchet & Clank experience is loaded to the brim with fun new collectibles, like Holocards and Raritanium. The hooks of exploring to uncover these goods sink in nice and deep, bringing big rewards if they are secured. Holocards provide percentage bumps to drops, whereas Raritanium is used to upgrade the weapons.

New ideas also emerge in the diversionary gameplay, but some humor and charm are lost in the process. The new flight sequences, in which Ratchet pilots a craft that moves as slow as a hot-air balloon, don't get the blood pumping, and are more a test of wrestling with somewhat clunky controls than skill. The amusing giant Clank sequences of old are no longer around. We instead see Clank solving simplistic (and somewhat boring) puzzle rooms with robot minions.

As challenging and fun as the core combat can be, the hardest part of the game (doubling as its biggest misstep) is a door-lock minigame utilizing the Trespasser gadget. This chore has the player lining up lasers with locks, spinning a series of wheels to alter the trajectory of the lasers. These puzzles usually only have one solution, and by the end of the game, take serious time and thought to crack. Insomniac obviously knew this minigame was tough and inserted a "solve it for me" cheat. The catch: If you cheat, you won't be able to earn a PlayStation Trophy or the in-game rewards tied to the puzzle.

Ratchet & Clank has always been a showpiece of new-gen technology, and while this entry's environments look a little retro, the detail in the characters and the explosion of bolts and gears are legitimate spectacles. The colors pop, the worlds feel more alien, and the heart of the adventure is right where it needs to be, with explosions and rockets lighting up the screen like a Fourth of July fireworks celebration. When Ratchet's doing what he does best (blowing stuff up), this new experience sings its classic tune well.

» Andrew Reiner

» **Concept**
Is this a remake? A sequel? A movie adaptation? It's all three of these things at once, with the most weight placed on providing new experiences for fans

» **Graphics**
The cityscapes are modular and retro in design, but the chaos that erupts onscreen is stunning

» **Sound**
The sound of hundreds of bolts being farmed never gets old. The soundtrack is also quite good, but the dialogue can be cringe-inducing at times – not from the voice actors, but the dated jokes in the script

» **Playability**
Ratchet is as agile as ever, and is equipped with his strafing abilities and upgraded jet pack. Side diversions fall flat and break up the fun flow of combat

» **Entertainment**
I couldn't put the game down, and I immediately jumped into the post-game Challenge Mode to play more of it

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

The Banner Saga 2

Two tiles forward, one tile back

8.5

PC

» **Concept**
Continue the journey where the first game left off, with the world's end looming

» **Graphics**
Beautiful artwork brings diverse Norse environments and characters to life

» **Sound**
An enthralling soundtrack from Austin Wintory accentuates both grim travel and cautious combat

» **Playability**
Combat and caravan travel are fairly easy to pick up, and are explained clearly for newcomers to the series

» **Entertainment**
A solid follow-up, but it gets bogged down in plodding encounters in battle and on the overworld

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

game informer SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Versus Evil **Developer** Stoic **Release** April 19 **Rating** NR

The world is dark, cold, and unforgiving. In fact, the world is coming to an end. This is the backdrop for the second installment of Stoic's Nordic tactical role-playing series – a place where lives hang in the balance. Not all will survive in this bittersweet journey through beautifully created caves, marshes, and skybridges, but the grim backdrop exudes a dignified grace. Even as your favorite characters give their lives fending off the never-ending swarms of Dredge and ensuring the civilian-packed caravan makes it to its final destination, Austin Wintory's tunes combine with the unique artstyle to create a wholly unique experience.

The tactical RPG tasks players with moving pieces tile-to-tile, with careful planning going a long way toward taking on the hordes of Dredge and other opponents. Banner Saga 2 enhances the systems of its predecessor by offering new classes with new abilities – the most extreme being the Horseborn, who can execute charging attacks and get an additional movement phase after their turns. I stuck with a powerful mix focused on ranged abilities with big and burly Varl up front and high-power archer and caster abilities from the backline, but I had the most fun playing with the new options, especially the support-oriented Ravens crew.

You are tasked with handling two main parties, each with separate characters and composition options. One party follows your successors and survivors from the events of the last game, led by either Rook or Alette. This is more traditional fare, and feels very much the same as the first game, with frequent battles and a deep roster to customize your playstyle (with new enemies creating additional wrinkles in battle).

The second group, the Ravens, is led by notable character Bolverk, a berserker. Bolverk and his crew are more interesting and entertaining, as the team composition revolves around making Bolverk unstoppable in combat through buffs and support, and letting the bloodthirsty brute tear through enemies with ease. Players have to be careful though, as berserkers like Bolverk don't distinguish between friend and foe when they get up close in the thick of combat, so positioning gets tricky. Despite more variation in combat from the original title, repetitive combat still drags the experience down.

While the core story delves deeper into the lore and portents the end of the world, the chance meetings and world interactions are drab. Whether you're fighting a gang of zealous witch hunters or just some poor tagalongs down on their luck, the events seem to carry little weight from choice to choice. With no end to random bandits or gangs of angry peasants, these interactions lack the depth and impact of the original game.

Story engagements are more interesting, and come with the threat of serious repercussions; sending characters to take the enemy by surprise can remove them from your character pool forever. I love that choices matter and shape the story, but I didn't like this permadeath in the original, and I don't like it now. I get that this aspect is part of the challenge, but it's still frustrating to commit resources from your limited pool of renown (experience/currency) and have a beloved character end up on a funeral pyre.

The Banner Saga 2 carries the banner onward for the series, and while it's made a few steps forward in creating more interesting tactical decisions and has added some more options for customization, it seems to have taken a step back in terms of making your journey across the world memorable. If you enjoyed the first chapter, you are ready for a great time continuing your tale right where you left off. If you're new to the series, you should play the original and start the saga from the beginning.

» Daniel Tack

Hyper Light Drifter

Entrancing minimalism and superb combat

gamefarmer GAME OF THE MONTH gamefarmer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Heart Machine
Developer Heart Machine Release March 31 Rating NR

9.5

PC • Mac

Concept
Hyper Light Drifter provides action-packed combat while painting a mysterious world at odds with technology

Graphics
The pixel art sets itself apart with captivating environments and an enticing, unexpected color palette

Sound
Composer Disasterpeace's soundtrack lends a sense of awe and scale to the world that consistently gave me chills

Playability
Bouncing between enemies is fluid and fast, making every fight a pleasure – even the ones that don't go well

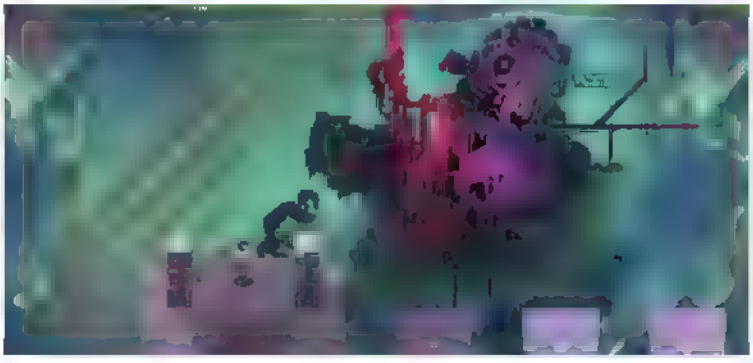
Entertainment
Hyper Light Drifter sticks with you long after the final boss, thanks to its impressive wealth of secrets, amazing soundtrack, and mysterious world

Replay Value
Moderately high

From its opening cutscene, Hyper Light Drifter created a world I immediately wanted to know more about. Titans walk along the landscape, but immediately turn into dilapidated robots before your eyes. The drifter clutches his chest as a violent cough causes him to buckle over. The montage and its soundtrack from composer Disasterpeace sent chills down my spine and caused me to involuntarily lean into my computer monitor – and that was only the first three minutes.

The game plays like a classic Zelda from an overhead 2D perspective, but the Drifter moves with a speed Link could never hope to achieve. He fights with a sword and gun, and uses the invaluable ability to quickly dash in any direction. Dashing is integral to exploration and combat as the Drifter blinks across chasms and dashes from enemy to enemy while avoiding their attacks. It's not a matter of mastering combos or mashing buttons, as the Drifter only has one slashing sword attack. Success is tied to moving in for a quick attack, getting out of the way with a dash, and finding another angle to drive in before the enemy has an opportunity to counter. Guns help expand your arsenal by giving you long- and mid-range options to mix in with your slashes and footwork. Mobility and speed are required, and the controls are able to keep up with the pace. Combat is fluid and fun, and I quickly had an empowering level of mastery over each encounter. I always felt as though I was in full control, even while bouncing at light speed between opponents, only pausing briefly to use a health item when necessary.

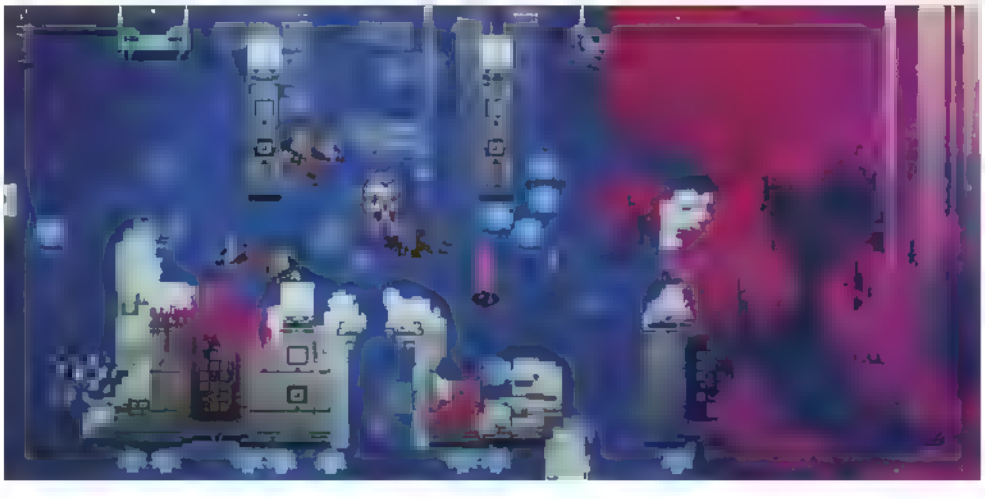
Fighting is fast and often difficult. Your health is limited and every enemy packs a wallop, but so do you, leading to a firm-but-fair rhythm to the action. Forgiving checkpoints help alleviate frustration, giving you plenty of opportunities to master a scenario with quick restarts and no fear of lost progress. This extends to the difficult bosses, as well. They all offer distinct challenges and designs; some have abilities comparable to the Drifter, while others focus on specific weapon loadouts. Each has enticing rewards, like new guns and upgrade currency. Quick restarts make the bosses fun to break down, since you barely get a chance to catch your breath after each death before you are back in the scuffle learning their patterns and applying your knowledge.



Upgrades are purchased with a currency earned exploring the environment. Every upgrade is worthwhile, subtly changing how you approach combat. You can unlock bombs, the ability to continually dash, and a power that makes your sword absorb enemy gunfire. The upgrades fit comfortably into the arsenal of moves you begin the game with; you don't unlock new combos or change your playstyle with different swords. Instead, you improve the skills you've been mastering since the game's opening moments. You become an expert instead of someone who happens to suddenly hit harder or have more HP.

I can't describe the moment-to-moment plot of Hyper Light Drifter. It takes place in a land that seems to have taken technology too far and paid a steep price. The world is morose and sad, with only a few small pockets of happiness strewn across its diverse environments. Both the direction you decide to explore in the game's beginning and the narrative are open to interpretation. This can create a confounding experience, but I never felt without direction, or like I had missed important narrative concepts tucked behind some hidden door. I appreciate the ambiguity of the narrative because it sold me an emotion about what happened in this world, as opposed to showcasing a list of specific events. It's a format of storytelling uniquely suited to video games, because players can move through and take in the world at their own pace. The closing moments left me with a calm-but-melancholy sense of overwhelming accomplishment.

Hyper Light Drifter has already positioned itself as one of the best experiences of the year. It's a challenging game, but it never feels unfair. The promise of seeing more of the world and hearing more of the fantastic soundtrack are worthwhile rewards for your tenacity. Despite seeing the finish line ahead of me, I did everything I could to prolong the experience by exploring every nook and cranny. I didn't do it out of necessity; I did it because I wanted to stay in Hyper Light Drifter's world for as long as possible. » Kyle Hilliard



Audioshield

Your music library brought to virtual life

8

Style 1-Player Rhythm/Music **Publisher** Dylan Fitterer **Developer** Dylan Fitterer **Release** April 5 **Rating** NR

Vive

» Concept
Punch and block a series of colored notes in virtual space, moving in time with your favorite music

» Graphics
Minima. background imagery, but the colored note streams and glowing shield lend a futuristic vibe

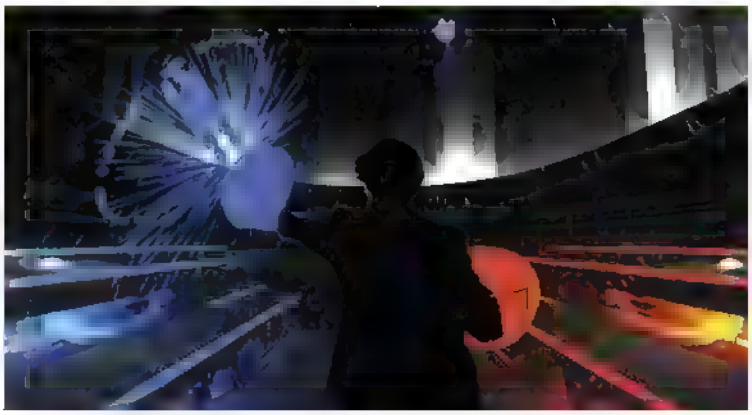
» Sound
Audioshield's greatest achievement is its ability to work seamlessly with any of your own music files, or tap into the vast library of any streaming Soundcloud song

» Playability
As a tool to communicate the tactile excitement of VR, Audioshield excels, and its gameplay is instantly engaging for new players

» Entertainment
Clever rhythm-based gameplay makes you feel like you're inside a sci-fi world of music given form

» Replay Value
High

Music games have always helped players feel more deeply immersed in the music they love, and Audioshield has two big advantages in fulfilling that goal. First, a clever behind-the-scenes system creates a playable track out of any music file on your computer, and also allows you to search for and play any music available in the sprawling online streaming library of Soundcloud. Second, it brings those songs to life in a fully virtual playspace, in which your body's motions meet and block individual beats as they fly toward you. Whether it makes you feel like a dancer, a boxer, or someone in a *Tron*-like dreamscape, there's no denying the sense of engagement and excitement.



Audioshield sports a utilitarian interface. Little fanfare greets the new user other than a collection of recommended Soundcloud songs that can be played right away. Those selected songs are good entry points, but they aren't the full setlist. A search bar allows you to search for anything available on Soundcloud – a service filled with remixes, live recordings, mash-ups, and original recordings from a huge number of artists. If that's not enough, you can also tap into music files on your PC, and they work equally well. No matter the musical selection, Audioshield analyzes the most interesting and intense parts, and transforms those into a fun and playable sequence of notes. While other games, including predecessor Audiosurf, have provided this freedom, the dynamic in VR brings new life to the concept.

The trappings of Audioshield are spare; the focus is on the action of interacting with the music. No progression system or story governs the gameplay that follows, other than the inherent desire to improve your score as you compete on the global leaderboards. Each song plays out on one of only two arenas, and you cannot customize or alter those play spaces, which is disappointing. Even so, the pointer-based menus and navigation all work adequately, and get the user into a song without fuss, at least most of the time. I encountered a few game crashes as songs loaded or completed, but otherwise had a smooth gameplay experience as I jumped from one song to the next.

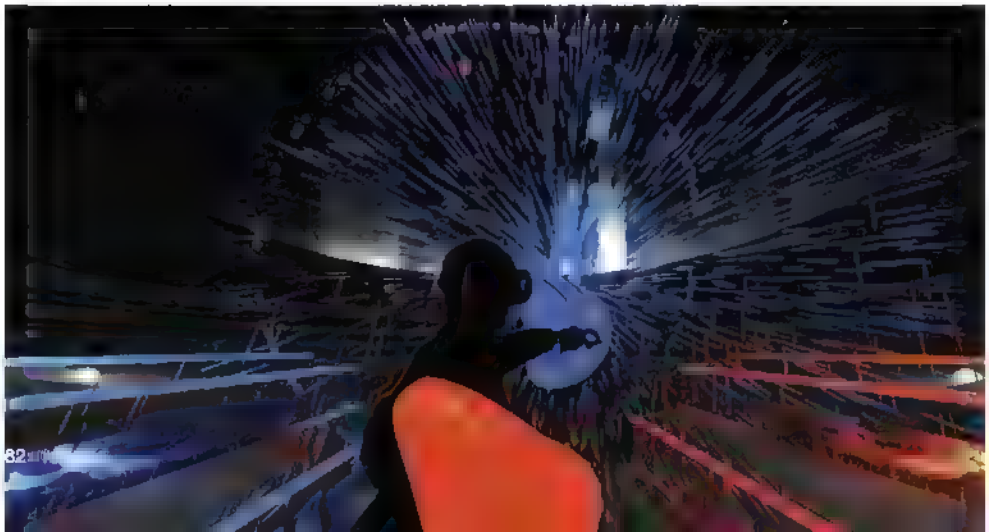
Once a song is selected, you find yourself standing on a raised dais. A stream of red and blue notes hover like attack planes on the distant horizon. In each hand, you hold a shield, color-coded to match one of the incoming note hues. Set to arrive in time with the beats of your selected song, the notes begin to hit from every forward trajectory. Swinging your arms left, right, up, and down, you block and jab the colored balls of light and tally up a high score.

The concept is instantly understandable, and the sense of involvement in the music easily equals other great beat-matching experiences, like Rock Band. The difference here is the sense that you're inside the flow of music, and your own body motions and vision tracking determine success, as if you were really holding a shield and your song had come to life to attack from every direction. After grasping the basics of blocking, the game gains additional complexity as you realize it's also tracking the speed of your punches, and the "artistic value" of your motions, encouraging an almost aerobic quality to the action.

The experience only works because the background algorithm creates interesting attack patterns. Red and blue notes fly in at different corners of your peripheral vision, forcing you to swing your arms quickly from one side to the other. Long, held streaming notes feel like you're holding off a mighty barrage, and the vibration in your controller supports the sensation. Occasional purple notes (both shields held close together) indicate a climax. And in most cases, the notes begin to arrive from higher attack paths later in the song, forcing your arms up in a way that replicates the body's motion for excitement and active movement.

While many of Vive's launch applications are demos or betas, Audioshield is a solid and complete game, and its ability to read and create playable tracks from any piece of music provides effectively endless replay value. This is an early testament to the power of VR to create novel experiences in established genres, and music-game faithful should seek an opportunity to at least try out this new take on interactive music play.

» Matt Miller



Chronos

A labyrinth with many layers

SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Oculus Studios **Developer** Gunfire Games **Release** March 28 **Rating** NR

8.5

Gunfire Games formed from the remains of Vigil Games, the creators of the Darksiders series. The new studio claims to have a "big chunk" of the team behind Darksiders, including numerous key roles – and it shows. The elevator pitch for the game is Zelda meets Dark Souls, but Chronos is much more than that; it combines exploration, combat, and atmosphere into a challenging and rewarding experience that proves VR can play host to full-featured games for the hardcore crowd.

After selecting your gender, weapon, and one of two difficulty settings, the game starts with your character washing up on the shore. Your young adventurer embarks on a quest to challenge a dragon who lives in a labyrinth you can enter only once a year. If you fail, you reenter the following year, older and wiser as you try to unlock the secrets of this world.

Chronos is viewed from a third-person perspective, but the camera is set at a fixed point like early Resident Evil titles, and you use the Rift to manipulate the camera to examine the spaces. I got lost in the stylized beauty of the world; the environments feel large in virtual reality and the objects, enemies, and your character gives them depth. Due to the fixed camera (and the fact that the world is a labyrinth), navigation can be disorienting at times. You exit an area to the left, but return to it by going right, which adds to the feeling of being lost in a maze.

The journey starts slowly as you explore your first environment and learn the ropes, but you notice early hints that Chronos' universe is a futuristic fantasy that has a history in our real world. It's an interesting set-up, but the core is still rooted in classic fantasy adventure. You have puzzles to solve, quests to complete, weapons to find, and magic powers to learn. These features aren't revolutionary, but they give the action purpose, and infuse Chronos with a fun, classic Zelda feel.

Despite sharing some of Zelda's adventure trappings, combat has more in common with Dark Souls than Nintendo's classic. Battles are up-close and personal. Using your shield to fend off attacks is key, as is learning the attack combos of your enemies so you can pounce when you see an opening. From small soldiers to rock monsters, I enjoyed learning enemy patterns and fighting for my life, hoping to reach the next checkpoint intact.

Your health is a limited resource, but you get more Dragon Hearts as you progress, which refill your health like an Estus flask from Dark Souls. However, the only way to refill your supply of dragon hearts is to die and start over. Each area only has a few checkpoints, so opening shortcuts is key to navigating the world and working through the enemies. The battles are tough, and dying carries an interesting penalty. You age one year for each failure, and your options change the older you get.

Your character levels up quickly, and you can put points toward strength, agility, arcane, and vitality. You start the game in your teens, and attributes like strength, vitality and agility are cheap due to your youth. As you age, those attributes become more expensive, but arcane becomes cheaper. Your character also gets a new talent for every 10-year milestone, which adds an extra boost to your core stats. While you won't run out of lives, there is a certain pressure to stay young and build up your character's strength so each run is important. Each cheap death feels catastrophic. Your age is reflected in your character's face, so when I completed the game at age 63 I looked worn from the years of battle and had gray hair.

I still can't believe Gunfire Games completed Chronos in time for launch of Oculus. It's an engaging game that took me about 20 hours to finish. It travels to far lands, features challenging bosses, and does an impressive job of showing that, even from a third-person perspective, games in VR can transport you to another world. Chronos made a believer out of me, and I can't wait to see what this studio does next. » **Andy McNamara**

Rift

» **Concept**
An adventure that combines elements of The Legend of Zelda and Dark Souls in VR

» **Graphics**
A stylized world hints at realism, but remains anchored in fantasy

» **Sound**
The sounds complement the world and add another layer to the VR illusion

» **Playability**
Combat finds a nice balance between challenge and aggravation. It plays like other action/adventure titles, but you can move your head to control the camera

» **Entertainment**
Fun exploration and satisfying battles make this a lengthy journey worth taking

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Job Simulator: The 2050 Archives

Service with a smile

6.5

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Owlchemy Labs **Developer** Owlchemy Labs **Release** April 5 **Rating** NR

The Bad

» Concept
Experience the regular human jobs of today as imagined by robots from the future

» Graphics
The surroundings have lots of interesting details and are fun to inspect in VR. Being rooted to four simple areas doesn't give you much variety, though

» Sound
Many of the prompts and effects are funny, but the audio isn't a standout feature

» Playability
Manipulating the environment works as well as it needs to. Eventually, fumbling with objects becomes part of the charm

» Entertainment
Despite some funny moments, Job Simulator doesn't offer enough depth or variety to be satisfying

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Many people use video games to escape from the ordinary, so the concept of Job Simulator might seem pointless at first. Players performs basic duties of four everyday occupations: office worker, chef, convenience store clerk, and auto mechanic. However, putting on your Vive headset isn't like heading off to the daily grind. Owlchemy Labs' VR title has plenty of irreverence and surprises, but I was still happy to punch out at the end of the day.

While the professions seem familiar at first, you quickly realize something isn't normal. The copy machine spits out solid objects, and you "burn CDs" by putting them in a toaster. The jobs you're simulating don't always line up with reality; they are just the closest approximations that robots in the year 2050 can imagine. This disconnect is the source of a lot of funny moments (and frequent uses of "job" as a verb), and that charm and humor is the main draw of Job Simulator.

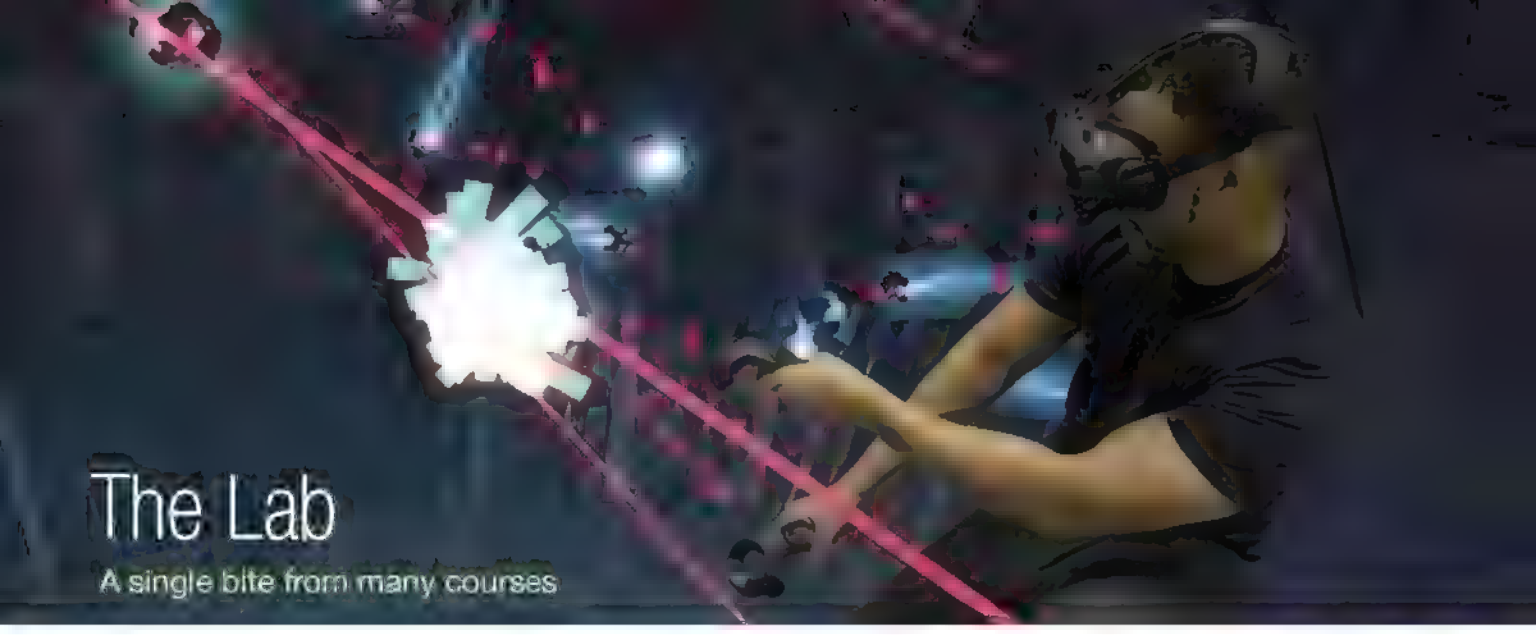
The professions are well-suited to the Vive experience, giving you small and densely packed work areas for your various tasks. You make coffee, add fluid to cars, put hotdogs on the rollers, and cook steaks depending on your currently selected sequence. Each job has a standalone linear progression of tasks to complete, but they all have you using the controllers to navigate 3D space, grabbing objects, turning dials, and pressing buttons. Controlling your in-game hands occasionally feels clumsy, but that also results in entertaining moments, like

knocking the fire extinguisher onto the stove, or throwing paper airplanes at your co-workers. Because your tasks are painfully simple, these mistakes never have any repercussions, so they're easy to laugh off.

From kitchens to cubicles, you have enough space to maneuver and interact, but the limitations of your play space still make sense. Counters and machinery present intuitive boundaries, so I never worried about inadvertently hitting walls. If anything, the danger is thinking the in-game surroundings are real; I leaned back against a non-existent wall once, and also tried to use a virtual table to support myself as I bent down. While the workplaces have lots of objects to interact with, being limited to four environments means that you quickly exhaust your options, without any additional challenges or modes, you have no reason to keep playing after you complete your assigned duties.

Despite the changing backdrop, everything from the jokes to the tasks run together; whether you're putting gum in a bag or a tomato in a blender, you're basically going through the same motions. They're clever the first few times, but you already have a limited variety of activities, and all the repetition doesn't help.

Job Simulator lives up to its own ambitions, presenting a compact, cute, and accessible showcase for interacting with virtual locations. I can't deny the fun and novelty of the experience, but the entertainment fades quickly. Popping in for a few minutes to dump an energy drink on an engine or make fire-extinguisher soup is funny, but that's as deep as the experience goes. The laid-back toybox structure means that I was never under pressure, but I was also never challenged or engaged beyond VR's universal joy of inhabiting a digital space. ▪ **Joe Juba**



The Lab

A single bite from many courses

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Valve **Developer** Valve **Release** April 5 **Rating** NR

8.25

Among the many new and intriguing experiences available on the new virtual-reality platforms, no single application sells the flexibility of the medium like The Lab. Valve has crafted a free software collection that includes several smaller adventures, each varied from the last, and all meant to showcase a different VR experience. This should be the first title you play on Vive, and the one you show your friends and family so they can "get it." The Lab is a victim of its own excellence, as each small encounter is so engaging that you desperately want more

You are another of Aperture Science's unfortunate test subjects, this time tasked with exploring various pocket universes. As a human, Aperture has deemed you the perfect expendable resource. Taps on the controller send you around the hub lab to various experiments, where you don head-sized bubbles to launch the activity of your choice.

Veteran gamers should start with Xortex, a new twist on the bullet-hell shooter model. One of your hands/controllers acts as a ship moving and shooting freely in 3D space, even as increasingly dangerous laser beams and growing projectiles converge on your location. Maneuvering around the attacks is fun, especially as you start to use the full room space to duck down, leap over, and sidestep in the real world to escape a hail of attacks. The visual effect is impressive as enemy ships and projectiles fly through the room in which you stand.

Longbow and Slingshot each offer surprising variations on first-person action. In Longbow, you enter a cartoonish castle world filled with stick-figure invaders, and use a bow and arrow to shoot them down before they breach the walls. The pull of your bow as you aim feels just right, and leaning over a parapet to fire at passing barbarians is fascinating.

Slingshot transports you to an Aperture warehouse facility, in which you're shooting various personality cores at explosive barrel structures using a giant slingshot. Every core that drops into your weapon has its own character, and I often held fire just to listen to the hilarious dialogue each spouts prior to launch. In both of these first-person minigames, the sense of tracking and hitting a target in virtual space sells the fun.

Robot Repair is a return visit to the characters of Portal, and an amusing interactive sequence in which you futilely attempt to repair a damaged Atlas robot, much to the delight of the sadistic mistress of the facility. Secret Shop takes visitors to DotA's Secret Shop and its many weird and mystical objects, with the ability to miniaturize oneself and explore its nooks and crannies. Neither of these are games in their own right, but the sense of virtual discovery in a fictional world is thrilling

If non-fiction is more your thing, then The Lab's three other activities should appeal. The Solar System is just what it sounds like – a virtual scale model of the sun and its planets, where you have the ability to walk between them, or even pluck Jupiter or Venus from their orbits to fling them about. The Human Body Scan lets you examine a skeleton and some of its body systems from any angle, even sliding a vertical slice into place so you can better examine particular areas, like the inside of the mouth. Postcards lets you visit four real-world locations and explore them like you were really there (at least within a limited space), all while playing with a mechanical dog that cavorts through the landscape. The vista of Vesper Peak in the Cascades is particularly breathtaking. As I explored, I couldn't help but think about future opportunities for education, new styles of photography, and travel in VR.

Even in the hub, Valve has gone out of its way to provide fun toys. A remote-control drone can be flown about the lab. Draw and erase markers to your heart's content on the lab whiteboard. Blow up helium balloons and bat them around, or shoot them as they float away with the longbow. And your cute robot dog from the Postcard application is happy to fetch virtually anything. Upon dropping the item at your feet, the overhead robot voice declares that: "Friendship has just been discovered in Pocket Universe Lab 8." These and other toys aren't minigames, but they made me feel an uncanny sense of presence in an unreal place. At one point, I actually tried to put my real-world controllers down on a virtual table.

Valve has an uncanny ability to home in on what makes an activity fun, and then bullseye the target. The studio has done so again with The Lab, and every one of the activities is a blast. However, none of these activities fully tap their own potential. Xortex could include more and ever more bullet-filled levels. Your archer could defend new castles against better armed foes. Your mechanical dog could learn more tricks, and be a virtual-pet game all on its own. And I challenge anyone not to want a VR Portal game after you check out Robot Repair. What these games lack in depth, they make up in charm and accessibility. The Lab is joyful and light, and a perfect evangelist for VR's many possibilities. » **Matt Miller**

Vive

» **Concept**
Explore the many pocket universes jutting off from Aperture Science's research labs in VR

» **Graphics**
Each small experience looks sharp, and a few are among the most detailed VR environments yet crafted

» **Sound**
The star of the audio is the voiceover work, which lends the irreverent humor of Valve's Portal series

» **Playability**
Movement and tracking is spot-on, and each minigame features intuitive controls

» **Entertainment**
The single best introductory product for grasping the fun of Vive, and it is free

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Eve: Valkyrie

Flying and fighting through dead spac

6.25

Rift

» **Concept**
An arcade space-combat experience brought to life by VR

» **Graphics**
One of the better looking VR games at launch, but occasionally subject to tearing

» **Sound**
Katie Sackhoff's voice work is solid – too bad the game doesn't have more story to explore with her

» **Playability**
The combat is easy to pick up and play, but lacks the depth found in many space combat games

» **Entertainment**
The experience of sitting in a VR space fighter is thrilling, but single-player and multiplayer options are sparse

» **Replay Value**
Low

Style 1-Player Action (16-Player Online) **Publisher** CCP Games **Developer** CCP Newcastle **Release** March 28 **Rating** NR

Space may be the final frontier for man, but it's one of the first frontiers being explored by virtual reality. Titles like Elite: Dangerous and Eve: Valkyrie are fueling a space combat renaissance, and the best way to play is sitting in a virtual cockpit, toggling the various console instruments and peering out into the great unknown between waves of fighters.

Eve: Valkyrie trades the hard sci-fi trappings of games like Star Citizen and Elite in favor of a more streamlined, arcade experience. You don't need to constantly manage energy resources between your shields, weapons, and engine; all you need to do is point and shoot at any ship you can catch. The true skill is measured by how well you can stick to evasive enemies and dodge incoming fire.

The visceral experience of sitting in this futuristic cockpit is the biggest selling point to Valkyrie. Being able to move your head to track ships as they fly across your bow or turn aggressively brings you into the experience in a way a 2D screen cannot, and I cringe every time a blast breaks through the cockpit windows and the cold ice of space takes over my vessel. The potential for a defining VR experience is here, which is why the extreme lack of compelling content is such a shame.

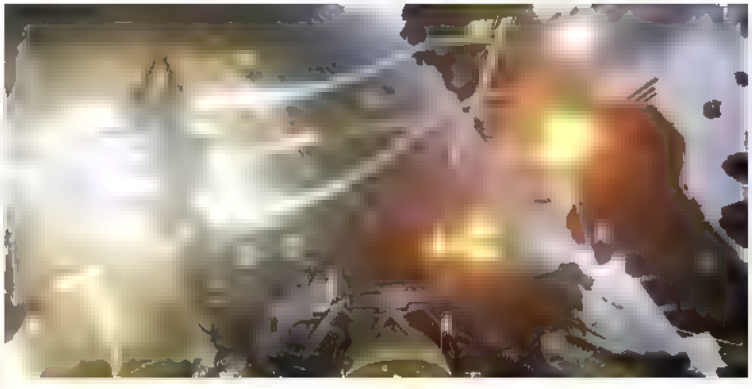
In Valkyrie you play the clone of an ace pilot, experiencing deaths countless time but remembering your previous failures so you can presumably learn from those mistakes. Few details are given as to who you are fighting for and what is at stake, but the setup is intriguing. Rather than continue to build on this narrative kernel from the opening sequence, CCP offers a handful of wave-based combat scenarios and a scouting mode where you can fly through the small number of environments to locate backstory "echoes" and some salvage for ship upgrades. The environments used for both are pretty to look at, but largely stagnant; you can't even shoot the debris floating through space. The lack of more scripted mission sequences is a major wasted opportunity. I hardly expected a game in 2016 to have less compelling content than decades-old space-combat forefathers like X-Wing and Wing Commander.

Instead, Valkyrie places the majority of its chips on a multiplayer bet. Dogfighting is undeniably alluring, but the design choices the team made feel ripped straight out of a first-person shooter. Your mode options are 8v8 team deathmatches and a thematically strange conquest mode. A long progression eventually allows you to unlock a couple other ship types and cosmetic customizations, but even with different ships at your disposal, the battles lack dynamism, and my interest in continuing the progression unlock stream subsided.

Another problem facing Valkyrie is one completely out of CCP's hands: low player population. Given the extremely short supply of Rifts out in the wild, most of your battles are fought against bots rather than real people. This problem should be alleviated when Oculus ramps up production, but by then, will anyone be around given the limited content?

Based on early demos, Eve: Valkyrie seemed to be one of the brightest beacons for virtual reality gaming. That potential clearly exists in the final version, but woefully underdeveloped single-player and multiplayer offerings ultimately suck the air out of the cockpit.

» Matt Bertz



Lucky's Tale

A story not worth repeating

Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Playful Corp **Developer** Playful Corp **Release** March 28 **Rating** 13+

6.5

Rift

» **Concept**
A third-person platformer that plays well in virtual reality, but doesn't offer much challenge or variety

» **Graphics**
Colorful in tone, but lacking a creative spark

» **Sound**
The playful melodies fit the action well. Lucky is mostly a silent protagonist, even while platforming

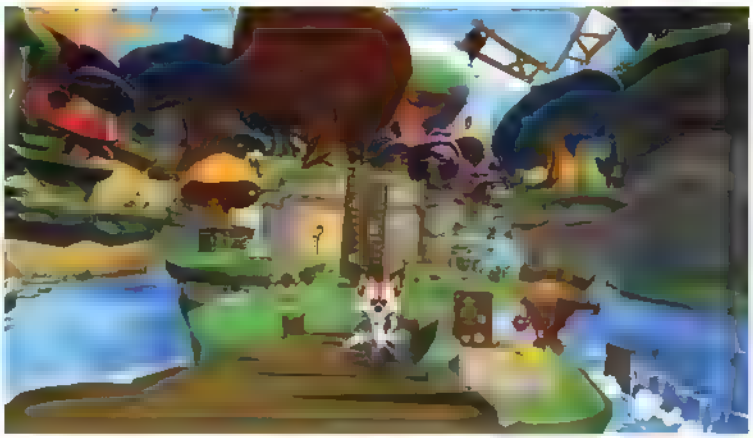
» **Playability**
The move set is simple from the outset and doesn't expand as the adventure unfolds. The challenges also stagnate early on

» **Virtual Reality**
Virtual reality has the potential to deliver a great action/platform experience. Lucky's Tale isn't it

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Don't let Lucky's cape fool you, this fox is no superhero. Don't expect any evil-crushing feats of strength from the wood and critter; Lucky can jump over narrow gaps and spin his tale to knock away enemies, but that's where his talents begin and end. Simplicity lords over most of Lucky's Tale, leading to an adventure that rarely gets the blood pumping.

One of Lucky's Tales' biggest thrills comes in the opening story sequence, in which a giant, tentacled beast reaches into Lucky's home to kidnap his friend Piggy. The size of the beast is impressive – a nice showpiece that demonstrates how scale can be more intimidating in virtual reality. This villain reveal is a promising first step, but it ends up being the most exotic and creative element in the entire journey.



I wouldn't say Lucky's adventure goes downhill from here, but the gameplay rarely delivers that initial "wow" factor. The world Lucky explores is ordinary in design, consisting of giant mushrooms, swinging logs, and overly happy caterpillars on the prowl. As colorful as these sights are, nothing steals the eye. I got a kick out of turning around in my chair to see how high I climbed, and moving my head forward to get a closer look at an enemy, but the landscape itself is unremarkable.

Leaping across lily pads and tail-whacking enemies becomes the routine for most of the stages, and the occasional boss fights and bomb-throwing sequences aren't enough to spice up the action. Developer Playful Corp rarely detours from the basics. By the third level, I felt the action was in desperate need of variety.

Lucky's Tales' gameplay smacks of proof-of-concept, and you can almost sense the developers tiptoeing through the uncharted virtual-reality waters. The training wheels are loosened in the final two stages, where spinning platforms require quicker reflexes, but the majority of the game is played too safe.

Part of the problem is Playful Corp's decision to gate progress, which artificially expands the length of the game. In order to reach new levels, Lucky must first collect a specific number of Paws. A Paw is rewarded for finishing a level, but that isn't always enough. To earn more Paws, the player must reenter the levels to complete time trials or red-coin challenges. If the level was boring the first time (which many of them are), replaying it feels like a chore. And if you happen to die during either of these missions, there are no checkpoints. You're warped back to the beginning and must retrace your steps. For the red-coin challenges specifically, if you miss a coin, which is easy to do, you warp back to the beginning and must look for that needle in the haystack as you venture through the environment again.

Even with the gating in place, Lucky's Tale is short. Playful Corp can be commended for adopting a classic genre to VR, as well as releasing a game with a high level of polish, but thrills are fleeting and the fun rarely surfaces as Lucky hunts for his dear pig friend.

» Andrew Reiner

Severed

Slash after satisfying slash

8.5

gamefan former SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** DrinkBox Studios **Developer** DrinkBox Studios **Release** April 26 **Rating** T

» Concept
Use the Vita's touchscreen to slash your way through legions of grotesque monsters on a quest to save your family

» Graphics
The deep hues of red and blue accent with the earth tones to create a beautifully devastating landscape

» Sound
The soundtrack reflects Sasha's mindset, bouncing back and forth between portraying hopelessness and exuding determination

» Playability
Countering an attack then furiously swiping your finger to defeat your enemy is satisfying from beginning to end

» Entertainment
Even after I completed the final challenge of the story, I couldn't wait to dive back in

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Sony's handheld system hasn't seen many notable exclusives recently, but DrinkBox Studios has finally given players a new reason to pick up their Vitas with Severed. The developer (of Guacamelee fame) ties together rewarding touchscreen combat, enjoyable first-person exploration and puzzles, and a fulfilling upgrade system into one exciting package that no Vita owner should miss.

Severed casts you as Sasha, a warrior on a quest to save her family from savage beasts. Using the Vita's touchscreen, you slash Sasha's sword through any creature that dares get in her way. Swiping your finger across the Vita screen to emulate a sword slash rarely feels this natural or satisfying; this isn't a shoehorned-in, gimmicky mechanic.

The combat is built on capitalizing on openings in your enemies' defenses. Those openings can be created by countering their advances by parrying their strikes, or by slashing specific target points that pop up while they're readying their attack. Successfully countering an incoming strike, then watching your opponent's health drain as you feverishly swipe your finger across the screen is satisfying, but the real excitement comes when you square off against several adversaries simultaneously.

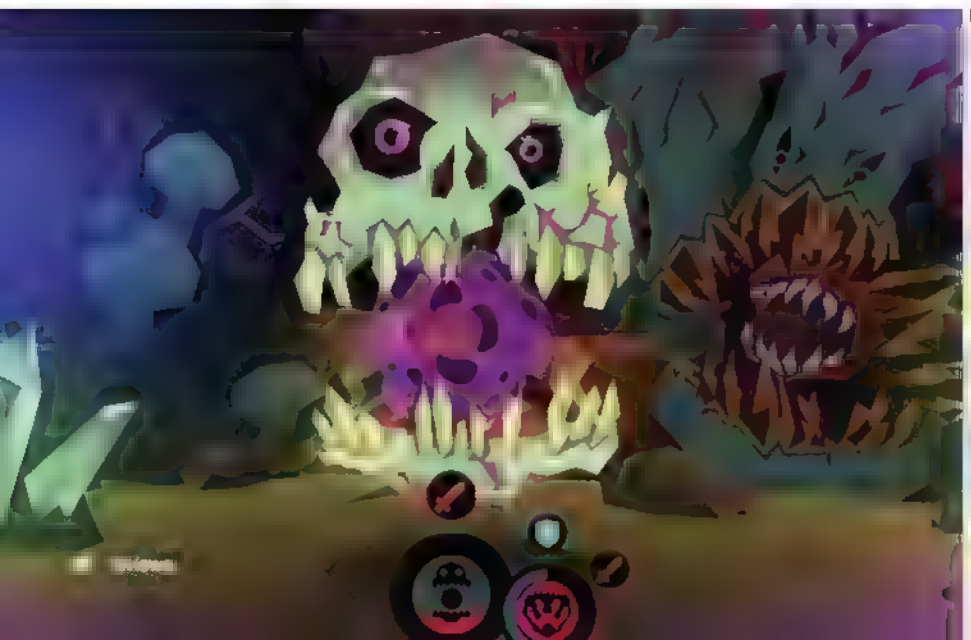
With each enemy possessing a distinct action gauge that dictates when they attack, fights against multiple foes become as much about time management as precise swiping. During early battles, I often got caught up attacking a single enemy, while the creatures behind me charged up and dealt damage. Initially, I survived such mistakes, but the later encounters aren't so forgiving, as enemies are not only buffed with different magic spells, but also armored and more powerful.

Your sword isn't your only means of defending yourself, since you also acquire magic abilities. One spell stuns an enemy so you can focus on the other creatures in front of you, while another devours an enemy's magic buff, stripping the creature of the stat boost and buffing your attributes in the process. Later in the story, some battles require you to complete the fight within a time limit, ratcheting up the level of difficulty and challenging you to be more strategic with the buffs you steal from opponents. Do you take the attack buff to more quickly vanquish your foes, or opt for the speed boost to buy more time?

The buffs you steal are specific to isolated bouts, but Severed also features a deep upgrade system that rewards you for being proficient in combat. Your primary means of finding loot is done through finishing battles with a full focus meter, which increases when you land several attacks in succession without swiping into an enemy's defense. Then you race against the clock to slash vital resources from the defeated enemy to apply to future upgrades. Once you have abundant resources, you can apply them to the upgrade system, which is split into three different branches. The upgrades range from basic boosts like increased defense or a higher chance of critical strikes to more specific improvements like your stun spell affecting all enemies or being able to steal two magic buffs from a single enemy. The upgrades are noticeable and come at a steady pace, and I loved searching out encounters each time to test out my new abilities.

The challenging battles are the highlight of Severed, but they are linked together through strong first-person exploration and puzzle elements. Each dungeon features multiple paths to follow. While most dungeon rooms are required to solve a puzzle to reach the next area, optional rooms reward you with upgrade resources and even brain and heart pieces, which increase your mana and vitality respectively. The puzzles aren't particularly difficult, but require enough thought to keep you from plowing through each dungeon. Each puzzle revolves around getting access to the next area, but the complexity varies, from accessing a switch that opens a new path to finding creative ways to retrieve key items. Some rooms in the early dungeons are inaccessible until you retrieve a certain magic spell later in the game, meaning you need to return to the early stages with that spell if you want to see all the nooks and crannies of Severed.

Though my playthrough only lasted around five hours, I wanted more. Shortly after I finished the story, I dove back in to explore every path I didn't already venture down with my new powers in tow. The draw to keep playing and exploring immediately after I finished is a testament to how much I enjoyed Severed. » Brian Shea



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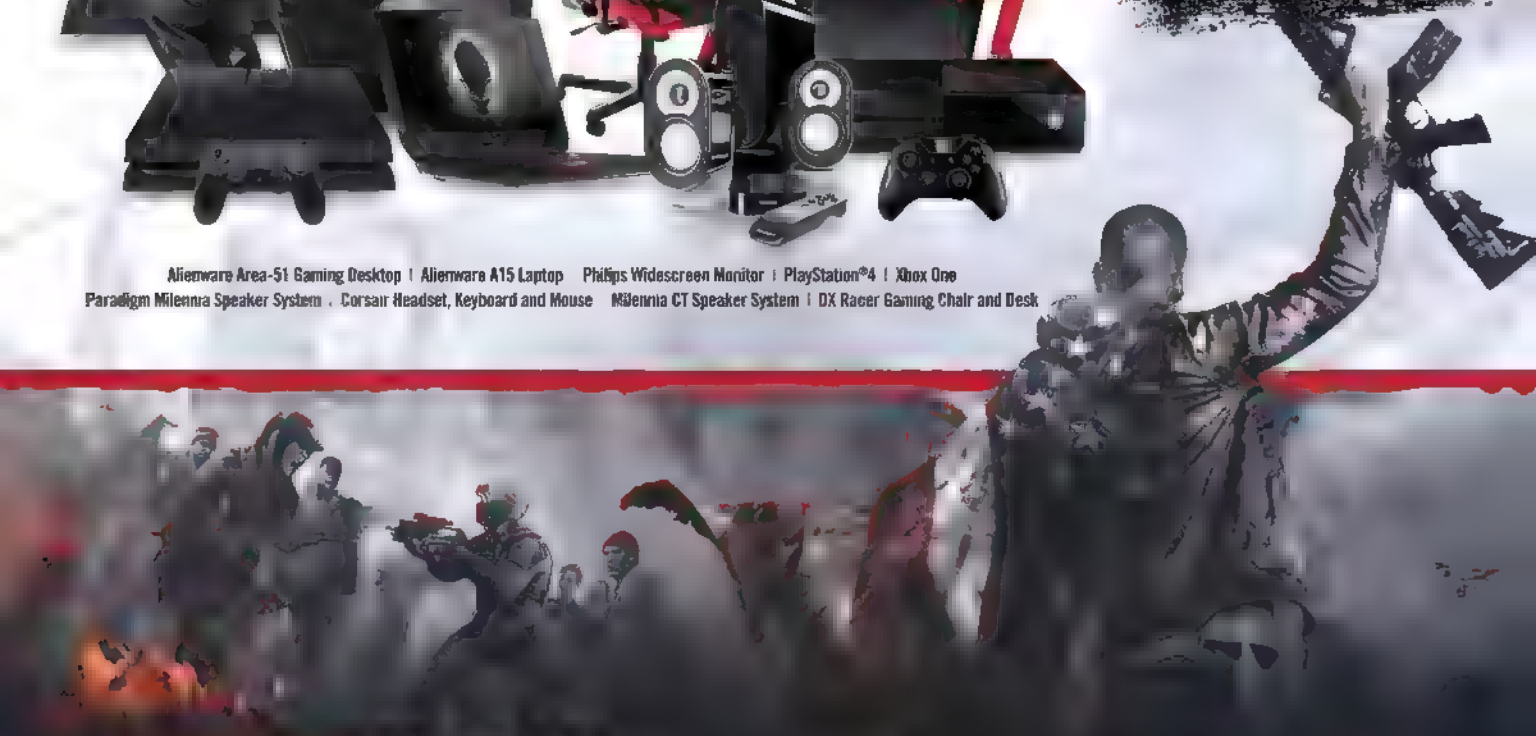

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Bravely Second: End Layer

A grind of a different color

7.5

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Silicon Studio **Release** April 15 **Rating** T

» **Concept**
Build on Bravely Default's robust job pool and top-tier combat while trimming some (but not enough) of the fat

» **Graphics**
The visuals are virtually identical to its 2014 predecessor, which isn't a bad thing

» **Sound**
Aside from a few annoying voice actors and overused tunes, the aural offerings complement the adventure

» **Playability**
Queueing up combat commands and navigating the world couldn't be easier

» **Entertainment**
Enjoying everything Bravely Second has to offer still requires putting up with a lot of filler

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Bravely Default harkened back to the classic era of JRPGs, for better and worse. A wonderfully diverse selection of job classes and the novel Brave/Default system breathed new life into the turn-based battles, but the adventure was dragged down by its abysmal exposition and a repetitive campaign that required playing through the bulk of the story five times in order to reach a satisfying conclusion. Bravely Second only manages to shore up some of its predecessor's problems, but the rich combat continues to shine.

Bravely Second tasks players with saving the world from the villainous Kaiser Oblivion, but like its predecessor, the opening hours of this generic quest are a real drag. Grinding your way through random encounters is required almost immediately thanks to a few cheap boss battles, and without side missions to earn new jobs at this stage, you're stuck using basic attacks and guzzling potions for health. I enjoyed very little of my first six hours or so with the game, as I burned through tutorials and became reacquainted with the world and characters.

Once Bravely Second started introducing new job classes, however, I quickly fell back in love with the combat. The ability to mix and match a primary skill set, a secondary skill set, and a sprinkling of random support skills for each character allows you to design the party of your dreams, while also experimenting with new builds whenever you see fit. Assembling a crew of beastly warriors and wizards and then steamrolling your way through fights never gets old, and kept me interested in progressing even when the story did not.

Thanks to Bravely Second's victory streak mechanic, thumping underpowered foes is also lucrative. This new system allows players to queue up multiple waves of enemies during random encounters, which doles out massive cash, XP, and job point bonuses at the end of the match. The streak ends if your enemies are alive to take their first turn, and figuring out how to game – or outright break – the system is half the fun. The victory streaks drastically hasten the grind for higher levels and new abilities, alleviating one of the major faults of the previous game.

Instead, the biggest grind in Bravely Second is the story. Quests still require you to backtrack all over the map only to listen to inane conversations that drag on for far too long. I don't mind the series' tongue-in-cheek humor, but it constantly undermines the drama. It's hard to take all the betrayal and tragic backstories seriously when Yew is constantly proclaiming that the next battle will be his "coup de gravy." The side quests are even more absurd. Each one puts you in the middle of a conflict between two characters sporting new job classes, then forces you to choose between them. You only receive the job of the character you defeat in battle, which creates a conflict between where you want the story to go and which job you want to add to your roster. I would have loved to help the reformed thief protect the water supply of his poor, desert-dwelling brethren from an unscrupulous red mage, but I also wanted his Mug ability to relieve bosses of their high-end items, so down he went. After a few side quests, you realize your decisions don't matter from a narrative standpoint, so you're free to pursue the jobs that interest you most.

As with Bravely Default, a mid-game event in Bravely Second resets the world, tasking you with completing all the missions a second time. That you only have to play through everything twice instead of five times may seem like little consolation, but the return trip is a drastically abbreviated and slightly enhanced experience. Most side quests allow you to skip past the boring dungeons and get to the boss fights quicker, and the new choice format allows you to fight a different opponent and gain a new job. The mid-story reset is still a lame way to extend an already lengthy game, but everything comes together with a satisfying run of final bosses that are challenging without being cheap. As dumb as the story is, I couldn't help but smile at where all the characters end up.

Even with 60+ hours' worth of gameplay, some parts of Bravely Second's skeleton are still surprisingly bare. The dungeons offer little more than a few treasure chests and basic switch puzzles, and a surprising number of environments – both dungeons and cities – are recycled from the first game. At the same time, the story is bloated with sappy and often pointless conversations. While trying, these shortcomings did little to dampen my enthusiasm for creating the perfect party and charging them into battle. The Bravely series is still in need of a deft editor, but the combat systems reign supreme. » Jeff Marchiafava

His abrasive attitude can frighten those who do not know him. But there is something more to this diamond in the rough...
03 victory streak!

Star Fox Zero

Fox sheds some appeal in this retread

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** April 21 **Rating** E10+

6.75

It looks laughably primitive today, but the original Star Fox was revelatory when it first hit the Super Nintendo. Thanks to a specialized on-board graphics chip, the game pushed polygons onto the screen in an era where sprites were king. Star Fox 64 followed up with more sophisticated visuals (including textures!) and a few new additions to Team Star Fox's hangar, including the Landmaster tank. Star Fox Zero is like a cover version of that sequel, hitting many of the same notes (and featuring familiar ships and locations) as Star Fox 64. Unfortunately, the experience feels dated and lackluster, rather than the exciting return of Fox McCloud that Nintendo was undoubtedly aiming for.

The most noticeable change is the incorporation of motion controls, allowing players to fine-tune their aim a bit more than in previous entries. Before, you piloted Fox's Arwing ship and other vehicles from a third-person perspective. In Zero, the image on your TV is essentially that view, while the GamePad's screen puts you into the cockpit for precision targeting. You have to use motion controls to better aim your crosshairs, which can take some getting used to.

The default setting, where your crosshairs and the GamePad's motion are always synced, simply doesn't work well. After playing for a minute or so, the calibration wanders off, so the center position isn't facing the TV. Resyncing is as easy as pressing a button, but that doesn't make it feel like any less of a failure. The alternate controls, where motion controls only come into play when you press the fire button fare better, since

you are essentially recalibrating every time you enter into combat. Even at their best, the controls are a necessary concession to giving the player better aiming options, rather than a fun way to interact with the game.

Aside from that, it's the same basic format we've seen before. Fox is on a mission to defeat Andross, and his mission takes him from the Earth-like planet of Corneria to far-flung places across the galaxy. Wherever you go, enemies have a tendency to streak into view in groups of three or more units, providing nice targets for Fox and his wingmen. You have rings to collect, bombs to pick up, and moments where you need to help your friends from taking enemies. It's a mix of on-rails sections with forced scrolling and free-range sections, where you're able to move around deceptively small areas at will. Battles generally lack a sense of scale, and few enemies offer anything beyond an easy kill. While there's a little kick in seeing some of these familiar Star Fox locations again, at a certain point it made me long for a hyperspace jump to someplace fresh.

Depending on your mission, you pilot one of several different vehicles. The Arwing is Fox's staple, and it can transform into a bipedal walker mode. You also have a drone-like Gyrocopter and the Landmaster tank. The Gyrocopter is the most interesting form, since its hovering ability lets you find a safe spot and act like a mobile gun emplacement. It also lets you deploy a little robotic helper to reach tight spots and hack terminals – including a stealth-oriented level that's one of the few highlights. The visual differences between vehicles are clear, as is the fact that you're either able to walk freely or are auto-soaring through the world, but they don't shake up the game in any major ways for the most part.

Star Fox Zero isn't ever bad, but it's generally uninspired. It's a musty tribute that fails to add much to the series, aside from tweaked controls and incremental vehicle upgrades. I loved Star Fox when it came out, and I'll even defend Star Fox Adventures (to a reasonable degree). For now, I'll stick to Super Smash Bros. when I feel like reuniting with Fox. » **Jeff Cork**

» Concept
Join Fox McCloud and his mercenary buddies to fight Andross' forces... again

» Graphics
Visuals are simple and colorful

» Sound
The soundtrack is a high point, down to the classic low-fi "good luck" that accompanies the start of each mission

» Playability
The motion controls add more precision, but they highlight the weaknesses of the GamePad's tech

» Entertainment
Star Fox Zero is like visiting a place you remember fondly, but have outgrown

» Replay Value
Moderate

Star Fox Guard

If you buy Star Fox Zero at launch, you can get a copy of Star Fox Guard as a bonus. This tower defense-style game puts you in charge of security for Slippy's uncle's junkyard as robots stomp their way toward a maze's center. You jump around from camera turret to camera turret, blasting the bots into scrap. It's not great. It feels like a scrapped minigame from a Nintendoland sequel stretched way too thin, and you can safely skip it.

The Score

7.25 | Don't Starve: Shipwrecked

Platform PC **Release** March 29 **Rating** T

For those who love trying to best Klei's ruthless brand of survival simulation, this expansion brings enough new content to be worth a go, even if it doesn't take Don't Starve into uncharted territory – Javy Gwaltney

7.25 | Stories: The Path Of Destinies

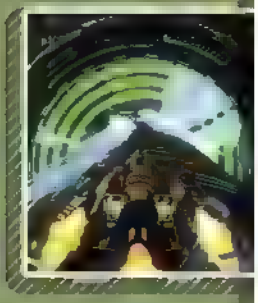
Platform PS4, PC **Release** April 12 **Rating** T

Stones delivers an interesting take on choice-driven storytelling, but the repetition of playing through the same stages and hearing the same story modified with your choices causes the experience to grow stale. – Brian Shea

7 | Minecraft: Story Mode, Episode 5 – Order Up

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC, Vita, iOS **Release** March 29 **Rating** T

Following the climactic battle between Jesse and the Wither Storm, this fifth episode doesn't live up to the gradually building excitement of its predecessors. – Brian Shea



6.5 | Radial-G

Platform Rift **Release** March 28 **Rating** NR

Radial-G has more going for it than a paltry tech demo. Its tracks – while not outstanding – show some thoughtful design by stringing together a few noticeable moments every lap. – Matthew Kato

8.25 | Day Of The Tentacle Remastered

Platform PS4, Vita, PC **Release** March 22 **Rating** T

The remaster comes with a welcome visual upgrade and revamped controls, while keeping the core experience just as funny and playful as it was two decades ago. – Elise Favis

7.5 | Trackmania Turbo

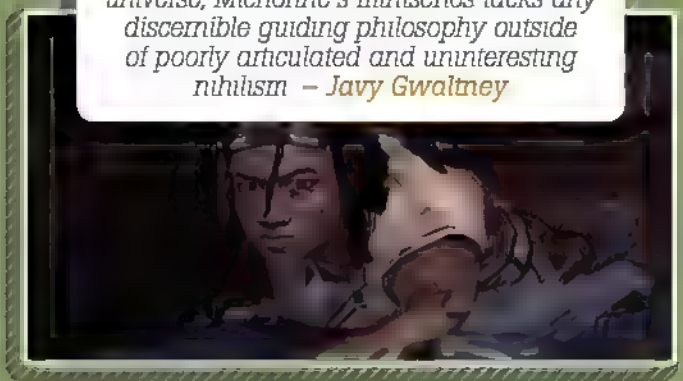
Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release March 22 **Rating** E

While I definitely got into that addictive headspace where I was chasing better times, even the endless variety of tracks doesn't offer the depth I was looking for. – Matthew Kato

6 | The Walking Dead: Michonne, Episode 2 – Give No Shelter

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC, iOS **Release** March 29 **Rating** M

Compared to Telltale's other work in this universe, Michonne's miniseries lacks any discernible guiding philosophy outside of poorly articulated and uninteresting nihilism – Javy Gwaltney



6.75 | Ashes Of The Singularity

Platform PC **Release** March 31 **Rating** NR

Ashes of the Singularity is a solid title, but is ultimately too unambitious in areas that matter. It demonstrates it can do amazing things with tons and tons of units on screen, but fails to provide compelling reasons to play beyond that. – Daniel Tack

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for the full reviews

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[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
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Far Cry Primal	8.75	Apr-16
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Volume XXVI • Number 6 • Issue 278

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ALIEN ICONS

Exploring the character creation of Ratchet & Clank

Insomniac Games had a successful run developing Spyro games on PlayStation, but moving into the PS2 generation, the rambunctious purple dragon wasn't the ideal archetype for a playable character. He could breathe fire, fly, and lower his horns like a ram, but since he was a quadruped, he couldn't do certain mundane things, like grip an item. As trivial as this may sound, it didn't sit well with the development team.

"Our decision to move away from Spyro was primarily motivated by limitations with Spyro himself," says Ted Price, Insomniac's president and CEO. "Spyro didn't have functional hands, which is why we introduced other playable characters [in Spyro: Year of the Dragon]."

With the PlayStation 2 introducing new technology and challenges, Insomniac parted ways with publishing partner Universal Interactive Studios (which held the rights to Spyro) and partnered solely with Sony to create a new intellectual property. Insomniac's first idea was for a game called Monster Knight, which eventually evolved into a project codenamed Girl with a Stick, a serious, RPG-style experience featuring a female protagonist with magical abilities.

"Sony supported [Girl with a Stick], but also knew before we knew that it wasn't really us, and wasn't in our wheelhouse to make," recalls John Fiorito, Insomniac's COO. The team concluded they should try something new, which resulted in a design sprint.

For roughly a week, everyone at Insomniac was encouraged to pitch ideas for a game. A corkboard in the hallway was overflowing with game concepts – everything from a bear wielding a fish as a weapon to "Goo Man," a game about a superhero made of a gelatinous substance.

David Guertin, Insomniac's principal artist, remembers the pitch that resonated throughout the office. "There was one phrase from Brian Hastings, our CCO, that was something along the lines of 'an alien that travels planet to planet with weapons and gadgets,'" he says. "I think it struck the subconscious core of everybody."

Guertin was initially tasked with exploring character concepts for this idea, but again, everyone at Insomniac could offer suggestions. The original sketches ranged from lizardmen to traditional aliens. One character featured a telescoping arm inspired by Capcom's Bionic Commando. The team felt most of the designs were too nondescript, prompting a move to explore more exotic options, such as animals. A cat form jumped out from the pack. The team liked the look of the 'V' shape his ears produced. Within three weeks, Insomniac went from blank pieces of paper to the character that would become Ratchet running around onscreen.

As character development commenced, so did the world design. Insomniac knew it wanted to make a third-person platformer infused with weapon play. One of the early ideas by the team was to not have the character wield weapons in a traditional way. "We tried the idea and put robots all over Ratchet's body," Guertin adds. "It was a complete failure. It was really confusing. He had a robot on his head, on his arms and legs. It was a visual mess. We stripped all of that away and just left the backpack as a robot."

That robot became Clank. He originally had a long neck, and weapons were attached to his body. Ratchet, while cartoony in appearance, was designed to look like an ordinary animal. He was mostly brown. That didn't read well with Sony's Japan team. They wanted Insomniac to give him more color.

"There was some resistance [to that idea]," Guertin says. "We went ahead and tried it, and they were 100-percent right. Once he got more saturated and got the stripes, he just found that iconic identity."

Another element that became just as iconic as Ratchet and Clank was Ratchet's wrench. Its comical size was originally tied to a failed gameplay pitch, in which Ratchet used it to dismantle lumbering robotic enemies. "It was Shadow of the Colossus well before there was a Shadow of Colossus," adds Greg Baldwin, another principle artist at Insomniac. The idea proved too troublesome from a technology standpoint, but the team liked the look of the wrench, so it stuck.

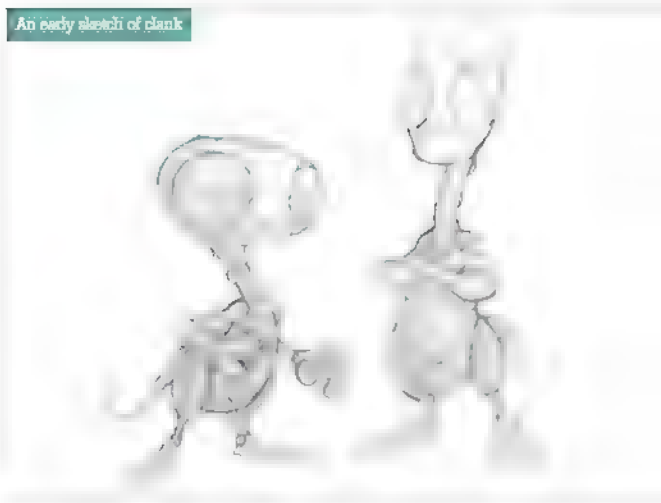
Insomniac instead pursued another failed idea: Ratchet leaping and gliding through the air, but the catch was he had to remain stationary to fire weapons. This combo was an effort to preserve the game's difficulty; the team thought people would fly through the levels too quickly if they could run and shoot simultaneously.

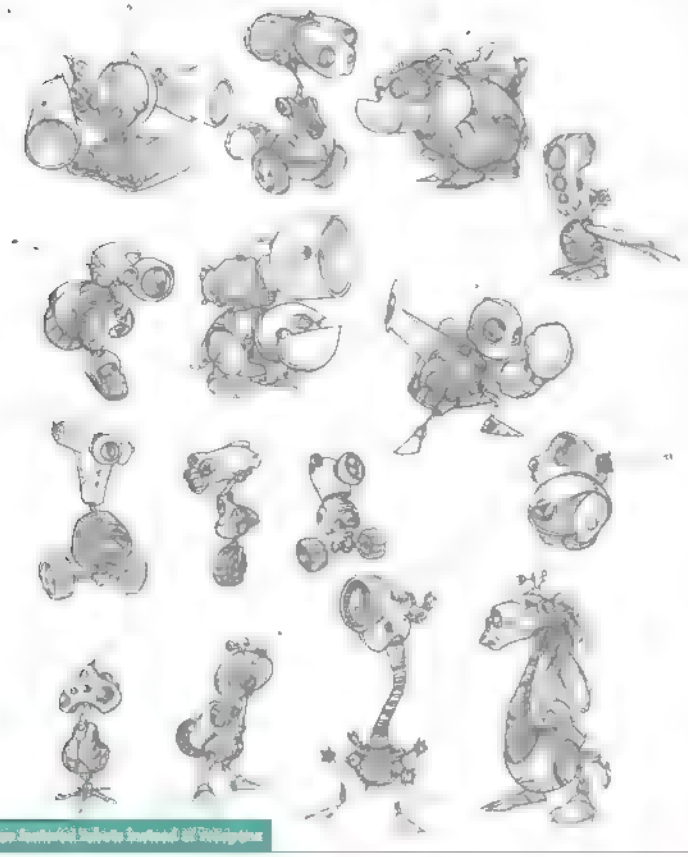
"We were concerned people would just lay waste to everything," Guertin says. "I don't remember if it was intentional or a bug, but you could run around with the bolt blaster, and I was like, 'Oh my god, this is the game!' Everything changed from that moment; it became a frenetic action-platformer that everyone embraced. We embraced that chaos. Ratchet is kind of built on that chaos."

The team placed a strong focus on creating weapons and gadgets that fit the game's new direction, but Insomniac didn't want to abandon the fun nature of the characters. Ratchet's personality was based on the *Back to the Future*-era Michael J. Fox. They wanted him to be charming and relatable, an underdog with a story people cared about. Although Insomniac admits Ratchet was a bit of a jerk in the first game, they liked the chemistry he developed with Clank, who was more clinical and data-driven in his banter.

Ratchet and Clank's personalities continue to evolve, but the duo has been together for over a decade now. "I look back at that time and I still can't get over how quickly we went from that one phrase that Brian [Hastings] came up with to something that was realized," says Chad Dezern, the studio director of Insomniac's North Carolina office. "It was absolutely like lightning. It was faster than anything I've seen in games." ◆

An early sketch of Clank





Early ideas for Ratchet's weapons

Early ideas for Ratchet

THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT

Harvey Smith

Not many game designers have been in the industry for more than two decades, but Arkane Studios creative director Harvey Smith is one of them. Working in the trenches on Ultima at Origin Systems, Deus Ex at Ion Storm, Area 51 at Midway, and finally Dishonored has given him a unique perspective on how games are made, how the medium has evolved, and what it takes to deliver properly on a creative vision. Read on to learn more about this decorated creator.

by Matt Bertz

+ **I grew up on the Texas Gulf Coast.** We didn't have a lot of money, but my neighbor had Pong. We'd go across the street and play Pong with them. We eventually got an Atari 2600. I was the right age for the arcade games in the 7/11 convenience stores. I was the right age for the various D&D campaigns, which I know aren't video games but are adjacent to video games.

+ **The first game I fell in love with was Adventure** by Warren Robinett. If that guy had any idea how much influence he had over my life. How many hours I spent playing that over and over and how it awakened a part of my imagination to systems, game pieces, and the way they could be differently treated and the way they could work together in ways that were not explicitly stated initially, but were like second-order consequences. Just amazing.

+ My dad was a welder in a chemical plant, and he killed himself at a certain point. My mom OD'd in front of me when I was six, so **I didn't have a very strong basis for what I wanted to do professionally.** I didn't think about people writing code for games or writing comic books or novels as a career.

+ I finished high school and worked at a gas station for a while, and at some point I got so sick of the environment **I signed up for the Air Force.** I ended up living in Germany for a few years in a little farming village, and I went to Saudi Arabia between the gulf wars. I had a bunch of interesting experiences.

+ When I got out, they asked for an address to ship all your stuff. It's kind of mind-blowing because they'll take you anywhere. You don't have a home at that point. I had some friends who had formed a band in Houston, and one of them – Arkane's Steve Powers – moved up to Origin making video games. He convinced me to move to Austin. He kept trying to get me to work in video games. By that point, I already played on the company softball team, I played in a Shadowrun campaign that we ran at night in the building, **I had gone skydiving with Richard Garriott** and the Ultima team. When I finally got a job there, people were like, "I thought you already worked here?"

+ **I grew up on writers like Roger Zelazny,** Ursula K. Le Guin, and people like that. But in later years, I flipped over to William Faulkner, Alice Walker, and Vladimir Nabokov. It's not the most exciting list in the world, but for me it was mind-blowing.

+ **I've written three books.** The first one was utterly horrible trash. The second one was kind of confusing, but about a period of my life. The third one, *Big Jack Is Dead,* I really wanted to write about my experience with my father, his eventual suicide, what it was like to be a kid on the Texas Gulf Coast who didn't really fit in. It's rough, it's like a first novel, but I really love the fact that I did it, and it was way harder to do than I thought.

+ **The lyrics of the Decemberists influenced Dishonored.** Colin Meloy's (sometimes problematic) lyrics are like little narratives. They are really intense, interesting, well drawn with few words. And then they have all these touches that imply he knows something about history. We were really inspired by his love of history and attention to detail when we were working on the Empire of the Isles.

+ **In 23 years of working on games, there have been two games that when the project was over I kept playing them.** That was Deus Ex and Dishonored. Other things you just get sick of after a while, but there are so many combinations and such, and you keep seeing things that level designers snuck in that even I didn't know about.

+ **Way more than I have made a mark on video games, video games have made a mark on me.** It's been a transformative experience, and moving to Lyon is doubling down on that because I know a much wider range of people now from different backgrounds.

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of $19.98 for 1 year or $24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

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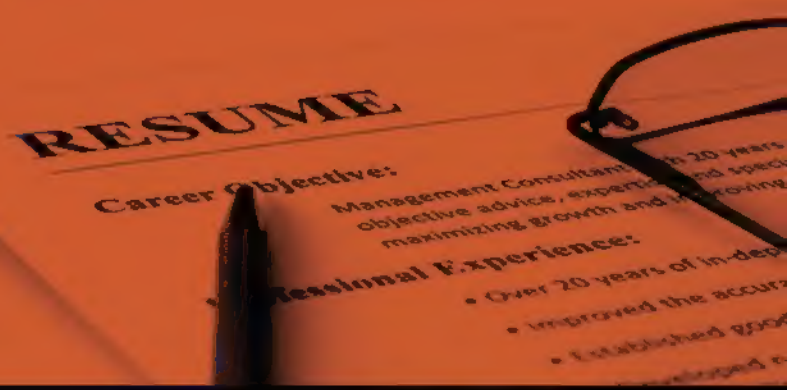

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